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CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ'S POLISH SCHOOL OF POETRY IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION

Abstract: Examining the ideological underpinnings of the anthology *Postwar Polish Poetry*, this article considers the impact of Czesław Miłosz's translatory choices on the rise in popularity of Polish poetry in English translation in the 1960s and its influence on contemporary American poetry. *Postwar Polish Poetry* by and large introduced Polish literature to the Anglophone audience. The analysis of the paratext (translator's preface, author biographies, jacket copy) and the translations foregrounds Miłosz's translatorial, poetological, historical, and political concerns. The article focuses on delineating the anthology's role in shaping the historiography of Polish poetry for the Anglophone reader and touches on the political commentary embedded in Miłosz's poetological choices. The overwhelmingly positive reception of the anthology reveals, in turn, the needs of American poets during the political upheaval of the 1960s to seek poetry outside their own tradition. Finally, the article argues that the subtleties of the anthology's framing of Polish poetry cannot be overlooked, for it continues to exert influence on the canon of Polish literature as it develops in English translation.

Keywords: Czesław Miłosz, Polish school of poetry, *Postwar Polish Poetry*, poetry translation, American poetry

Thinking about Miłosz's translation of contemporary Polish poetry into English is important to our understanding of the relationship between minor and major literatures before the fall of Communism and in our current global literary culture. Polish poetry in English translation was virtually nonexistent when Miłosz moved to the United States to take a visiting lecturer position at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1960. Today, it enjoys a prominent status among eminent American critics and poets. The quality of the poetry being written in postwar Poland and the prominence of Polish émigrés who turned to translating it, Miłosz among them, invig-

orated Western interest in the plight of the writer behind the Iron Curtain. The awakening of Anglophone readers to Polish poetry during the 1960s and 1970s was intimately tied to its particular social function, that is, to the picture it provided of the poet's role in society. The canon of postwar Polish poetry in English translation that Miłosz helped to form became a model of political engagement for American writers.

It would be difficult to overstate Miłosz's role in bringing Polish poetry to light in English. His interest in the potentially fruitful interplay between Polish and American literary nationalisms began during World War II with his first translations of T.S. Eliot's poetry into Polish. From this point forward he never stopped promoting American poetry, translating extensively and sending dispatches from abroad while serving as a cultural attaché in the U.S.

from 1945–1950. After breaking with the Polish government in 1951 and seeking political asylum in France, he continued to write about the relationship of Poland and the West throughout his ten years of exile there. He began translating into English while living, paradoxically, in France, a testament to the strength of his interest in Anglophone literature. Once he moved to the U.S. in 1960, his translation work turned almost exclusively to initiating Anglophone readers to the world of contemporary Polish poetry. Miłosz's long-standing interest in American poetry and his break with the Communist government legitimized him politically in the eyes of Western readers. Here was a writer who promoted the values of American literature; here was an intellectual who had experienced war and Communism firsthand, someone who could act as an envoy from another world distant from American experience.

Miłosz's early translations of Polish poetry (represented most significantly by his 1965 anthology *Postwar Polish Poetry*) mark a turning point in American literature. One of the first classes Miłosz taught was a seminar on the translation of poetry for students of Russian and Polish. In addition to codifying his views on translation, the seminar was of practical significance for the Polish poet: it allowed him to test before native English speakers his first whole-scale project of translating into a nonnative language, which eventually resulted in the abovementioned anthology.¹ The seminar on translation “encouraged Miłosz to translate contemporary Polish poetry into English” and marked “a new period in his career as a trans-

¹ The same year, the émigré writer Konstanty Jeleński published a similar anthology in French, *Anthologie de la poésie polonaise*, for which Miłosz wrote a lengthy introduction.

lator” (Gorczyńska 1992: 352; trans. M.R.) he would later call his Polish phase. With the burden of fluency transferred in part to native speakers, Miłosz could focus on the ideological thrust of *Postwar Polish Poetry*, which would become a seminal book for American poets and lay the foundation of a canon of Polish poetry in English translation. Therefore, the anthology deserves a close analysis in order to understand more fully the impact it had on American writers. As translation theorist André Lefevere has pointed out, the packaging of literature through anthologies, histories or biographies creates an image of a writer, a work, a period, a genre, and sometimes even a whole literary tradition. “The nonprofessional reader,” Lefevere writes, “increasingly does not read literature as written by its writers, but as rewritten by its rewriters” (1992: 4).

Before the response of American poets to *Postwar Polish Poetry* is discussed, it is necessary to analyse Miłosz's repackaging of Polish poetry in English. His translations promoted those authors for whom he felt a kind of enthusiasm, effectively undermining those literary tendencies of the moment that he disliked in Polish literature by way of exclusion. However, of interest is not simply the fact that he presented contemporary Polish poetry selectively, since any editor of an anthology necessarily must make choices; nor is it vital in itself that he seemed to disclose a zealotry for the work of Aleksander Wat, Tadeusz Różewicz and Zbigniew Herbert with the disproportionate number of pages devoted to their work. Rather, the particular criteria he used for selection better present his reasons for the project and its aims. The preface and author biographies for the anthology show Miłosz delineating first and foremost a translatory reasoning, with poetological, historical and political criteria also coming into play.

I will focus on the anthology's role in shaping the historiography of Polish poetry, an endeavor that would take on even greater scope several years later, when Miłosz embarked on the writing of his textbook *The History of Polish Literature*. The historical criterion for selection emerged in the biographical sketches that preface each poet's work in *Postwar Polish Poetry*. Taken together, these biographies read like a short treatise on the history of Polish poetry from modernist Young Poland to Miłosz's present. Far from the objective third-person biographies typical of anthologies, the sketches reveal Miłosz's voice, often as a first-person account. Rather than focusing on specific accomplishments and biographical facts, they often situate poets within the broader contexts of literary periods and use their poetry as a pretext for more theoretical discussions on the nature of poetry in gen-

eral. The following examples show the strategy well: “This is not the first time this dilemma [the conflict between metaphysical and moral or political urges] has appeared in Polish poetry” (Miłosz 1965: 35; of Mieczysław Jastrun); “The form of his poetry shows the continuity of a line going from the prewar Second Vanguard through Różewicz to younger poets” (Miłosz 1965: 89; of Zbigniew Herbert); “His poems written at the end of the war (...) illustrate, in their subject and form, the ‘overcoming’ of prewar sensibility that makes Polish poetry what it is today” (Miłosz 1965: 41; of Adam Wazyk).

As the book moves into the work of younger poets, the bios become more and more critical, assessing the merit of specific authors and the pitfalls into which they may stumble: “The question arises whether by shunning emotionality and choosing more and more oblique ways the young poets have not passed the point where poetry is menaced by causticity and aridity” (Miłosz 1965: 143; of Ernest Bryll); “At thirty he won a respectable position in Warsaw which may endanger his future development as a poet” (Miłosz 1965: 133; of Stanisław Grochowiak); “Now when, after a complete liberation of verse from inherited patterns, Polish poets are searching for a new tie with tradition, perhaps she is right in going directly to its roots in ancient Greek poetry” (Miłosz 1965: 147; of Urszula Kozioł).

For Wisława Szymborska and Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, Miłosz’s reflections on the nature of poetry go so far as to nearly eclipse all biographical data. In writing about Szymborska – one of only two women included in the anthology – Miłosz ventures into literary analysis with a discussion of her fondness for conceits that conquer us at first, he says, but sustained throughout a whole poem create a kind of automatism. His critique in no way reads as an author biography but rather as a snippet of literary criticism. Rymkiewicz’s biography, on the other hand, reads as a kind of theory of creativity. Miłosz’s editorial strategy for *Postwar Polish Poetry* quite clearly seeks to establish for the English reader two levels: the Polish cultural tradition and his personal reading of that tradition. The author biographies constitute a form of cultural editing in which he shapes the image of each of the poets and creates a history that establishes the reception of his or her work.

The political importance of the historical moment in which *Postwar Polish Poetry* appeared was not lost on Miłosz, and the hopes and fears he held for a literature that was coping with past and present censorship also became evident in the author biographies. His choice to limit the scope of

the anthology to poems published only after the political thaw of 1956 conveyed his assessment of the harm caused to Polish poetry, rendered sterile by governmental control prior to this awakening. However, censorship clearly shaped the specific nature of the new artistic trends as well, which had in some ways internalized the censor.² Of the question whether the poetry of young poets is menaced by causticity and aridity, Miłosz writes, "It would be unwise to try to answer that question without taking the circumstances into account, since in Poland the trend is the result of a reaction to bureaucratic rhetoric" (Miłosz 1965: 143). He focuses on poets within Poland who have maintained some semblance of an individual voice (note his reservation about Grochowiak's "respectable position in Warsaw") and largely excludes émigré writers. Although he states at the outset that he does not divide poets into those living abroad and those at home (he even denies that such a clear-cut division exists), he favours poems published in Poland, with only two émigré poets (himself and Bogdan Czaykowski) included in the anthology. Miłosz clearly recognizes translation into English as a way to give voice to poetry threatened by "selective silencing" within Poland.

In America, the political importance of the historical moment looked different and greatly shaped the reception of *Postwar Polish Poetry*. The political, cultural and psychological climate of the U.S. in the 1960s, and of Berkeley in particular, led to dramatic changes in American poetry. Poets felt a need for a new psycho-political quality, constrained as they were by the romantic assumption that a poem should convey a unified poetic self and by the modernist proposal that such a unified subjectivity be centered on immediate observations. As the scholar Paul Breslin describes the historical moment, from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s, American "poets and their critics began to talk less about craft and more about 'experience'" (1987: 1). Contemporary Polish poetry and other literature in translation provided a model of a different approach, one delineated by political engagement. As polysystem theorists have demonstrated, authors often rely on translation for new direction when their own literature is experiencing a turning point or crisis. Theorist Even-Zohar describes how the dynamics within a literary polysystem creates "historical moments where established models are no longer tenable for a younger generation. At such moments,

² For discussions of the psychological, political, and moral dimensions that lead to the internalization of the censor, see: J.M. Coetzee 1996, as well as Toronto Arts Group for Human Rights 1983.

even in central literatures, translated literature may assume a central position” (Even-Zohar 2004: 201). In turning to Polish poetry, American poets were looking not so much for a new style but for a new definition of the poet’s role in society during the political upheaval of the 1960s.

Miłosz’s emphasis on the “historical steam-roller” that inevitably shaped Polish poets suggested a difference in their mentality in relation to their role in society, above and beyond any linguistic innovations they might propose. In his 1966 essay “Point of View, or on the So-Called Second Vanguard,” Miłosz elaborates on his view of the poet’s role in society. He defines the image of the poet in Polish culture as intrinsically tied to Romanticism and the experience of Poland’s partitions, when the German and Russian languages were imposed and “Polish consequently became the language of freedom, a symbol of national identity and integrity” (qtd in Tabakowska 1998: 524). The role of the poet writing in Polish, then, was imperative for the preservation of the nation; the poet was seen as a key contributor to national language and consciousness. Miłosz’s insistence on the importance of a poet’s self-image in relation to society – and the very fact that he assumed such a relationship necessarily existed – aided American poets’ revolt against the conformity of the 1950s and the poetry of internalization within the self. Polish poetry in particular and translated literature in general provided other models from which American poets could build a different self-image and realize the full implications of post-war social criticism.³

The American writer and Trappist monk Thomas Merton, Miłosz’s friend and correspondent, had been instrumental in helping the poet to establish the canon of Polish poetry in English translation. Throughout their correspondence, which began in 1958 when Merton wrote to Miłosz after reading the English translation of *The Captive Mind* and continued until Merton’s death in 1968, Merton had asked him numerous times if he could make accessible “some of the Polish poets who are struggling [as Miłosz described it to him] with metaphysical dilemmas” for whom he felt America was “the right atmosphere” (Merton, Miłosz 1997: 170–171). When Miłosz finally turned to making them accessible in English, Merton proved instrumental in bringing *Postwar Polish Poetry* to fruition by writ-

³ Cf. Breslin 1987: 1–21. As the American scholar and translator Clare Cavanagh put it, “Eastern European poets generally have a habit of wreaking havoc with Western preconceptions of the proper relations between art and society, art and the state. And this has been a source of both inspiration and confusion for American poets” (Cavanagh 2004: 337).

ing to Doubleday on Miłosz's behalf and providing an extensive blurb that appeared on the back cover of the anthology.⁴ In 1968, in what would be one of his last letters after a number of years without contact, he wrote to Miłosz with a request:

can you send me a few translations of Polishpoets for a little magazine I am starting? (...) I would love to have something Eastern European, for example a bit of your own reminiscences if available in English, or anything of yours and anything of the Polishpoets. Why I keep spelling that as one word is a mystery to me... (Merton, Miłosz 1997: 170–171).

Merton's Freudian slip of the pen is testament to the subtle yet indelible way in which translation establishes a literary canon. Even as early as 1968, the canon was crystallizing into the *Polishpoets*. Miłosz would further codify the canon in the years to come, often referring to the Polish School of Poetry and arguing to varying degrees of success for other poets he translated into English, such as Anna Świrszczyńska, to be included in the canon. Through his

efforts to establish a canon of Polish poetry in English, he both paved the way for the emergence of his own poetry in English and defined Polish poetry for an Anglophone audience, whose strong interest, which continues up to today, is still defined by the particular historical and political view Miłosz delineated.

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⁴ Miłosz later recollected: "I didn't have to look for a publisher for my anthology *Post-war Polish Poetry*: after reading over the typescript, Merton immediately sent it with an enthusiastic letter to the major publishing house Doubleday, where his opinion had weight, and it was a done deal" (Miłosz 1986: 186–187).

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