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## Translation as Talking to Oneself: Miłosz Makes Whitman Speak

### Abstract

In this paper, the author examines Czesław Miłosz's poetic dialogue with Walt Whitman on the ambivalent status of the natural world and material existence. By translating Whitman's poems and interspersing them among his own verses in the collection *Unattainable Earth* (*Nieobjęta ziemia*, 1984), Miłosz practices a peculiar form of poetic commentary or criticism, drawing attention to certain tensions within the work of his American predecessor. This tendentious form of dialogue between poets simultaneously intertwines with a conflict within Miłosz's own poetics – as the Polish poet effectively argues with himself by proxy. The author plays close attention to Miłosz's translation of Whitman's "As I Ebb'd With the Ocean of Life," pointing to several crucial distortions of its original meaning and context. This analysis opens the broader question of whether Miłosz's poetry is truly hospitable to other voices or whether the dominant voice of the Miłoszean poetic subject inevitably subjugates or perverts them.

**Keywords:** Miłosz Czesław, Whitman Walt, translation, poetry, multi-voicedness, Nature

Czesław Miłosz writes in his book of *ABCs* that 'of all American poets, I will always have the greatest affinity with Walt Whitman'<sup>1</sup>. One might argue that T.S. Eliot – insofar as he was an American poet – ultimately had a more powerful influence on Miłosz's work, particularly in the crucial early stages of his poetic career. Nevertheless, the affinity with Whitman is plain to see. And indeed 'affinity' is just the right word in this context, since Miłosz largely

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<sup>1</sup> Cz. Miłosz, *Abecadło*, Kraków 1997, p. 30. Wherever I have cited Polish editions, the translation is my own.

found, in Whitman, a fellow traveller confirming his own pre-existing intuitions about poetry, rather than a direct influence or poetic mentor to be imitated or adapted. Miłosz wrote about Whitman in various essayistic reflections and translated a good number of his poems. He integrated most of these translations into his own poetry collections, thus introducing Whitman's words into the multi-voiced verbal texture of his own artistic productions. Indeed, these words become Miłosz's own in a certain sense, since they only appear in his Polish-language renditions of them. The Polish poet appropriates Whitman's words by translating them into his own language and including them in his own verse collections. In this paper, I shall suggest that when Miłosz enters into poetic dialogue with Whitman, he is largely talking to himself.

The Polish scholar Marta Skwara has enumerated some primary points of contact between the two poets in an essay entitled *The Poet of the Great Reality: Czesław Miłosz's Readings of Walt Whitman*<sup>2</sup>. According to Skwara, the two poets, above all, share a vast ambition to capture as much of reality in words as possible. Of course, this project demands a faith that something called 'reality' objectively exists – a far less certain philosophical proposition in Miłosz's time than in Whitman's. Secondly, they share a sense that poetic form must be expanded in the pursuit of this ambition. In both cases, this expansion of poetic form is somehow connected – albeit in quite different ways – with processes of social and artistic democratization. Thirdly, the two poets share a guiding anthropocentrism, placing human beings – along with human art and industry – firmly at the centre of their poetic visions. Finally, Skwara touches briefly on the importance of the body in the work of both poets. In fact, I would find in this aspect the most striking commonality between them, since both poets frequently appear as poets of the body and blood. When Miłosz describes the first stirrings under his own pen of a 'poetry of the future', which will express above all 'the rhythms of the body – the beating of the heart, the pulse, sweating, the bleeding of the period, the guinness of sperm, the position for passing urine, the movement of the intestines'<sup>3</sup>, it is difficult not to hear the lines of Whitman's 'I Sing the Body Electric' – a section of which Miłosz even included in his *Book of Luminous Things* (1996)<sup>4</sup>.

Miłosz's speculative musings on the future poetry of the body appear in his 1984 verse collection, *Unattainable Earth (Nieobjęta ziemia)*. In this paper, I would like to concentrate on Miłosz's poetic dialogue with Whitman in the same verse collection on another subject – namely, on the ambivalent status of the 'earth'. By translating Whitman's poems and interspersing them among his own verses, Miłosz practices a peculiar form of poetic commentary or criticism, drawing attention to certain tensions within the work of his American predecessor. This tendentious form of dialogue between poets simultaneously

<sup>2</sup> See: M. Skwara, *The Poet of the Great Reality: Czesław Miłosz's Readings of Walt Whitman*, "Walt Whitman Quarterly Review" 26, Summer 2008, p. 1–22.

<sup>3</sup> Cz. Miłosz, *Wiersze IV*, Kraków 2009, p. 32.

<sup>4</sup> Cz. Miłosz, ed., *A Book of Luminous Things*, New York 1996, p. 185.

intertwines with a conflict within Miłosz's own poetics – as the Polish poet effectively argues with himself by proxy.

Whitman's dominant attitude to the earth and the natural world is one of joyful praise. This approach manifests itself with particular clarity in a striking and characteristic passage from *Song of Myself*:

Smile O voluptuous cool-breath'd earth!  
 Earth of the slumbering and liquid trees!  
 Earth of departed sunset – earth of the mountains misty-topt!  
 Earth of the vitreous pour of the full moon just tinged with blue!  
 Earth of shine and dark mottling the tide of the river!  
 Earth of the limp gray of clouds brighter and clearer for my sake!  
 Far-swooping elbow'd earth – rich apple-blossom'd earth!  
 Smile, for your lover comes<sup>5</sup>.

Here Whitman draws on one of the oldest metaphors in poetry, identifying the earth and the natural world with a lover. Of course, in this passage – and in several others – the biblical *Song of Songs* sounds out loud and clear in Whitman's *Song of Myself*. Elsewhere, he writes: 'The press of my foot to the earth springs a hundred affections'. Whitman's poetry sweeps the reader along on a tide of love for the earth and all the living beings which inhabit it, from the 'liquid trees' to the 'wild gander' to the 'litter of the grunting sow as they tug at her teats.' Whitman claims a basic affinity or even identity with everything that lives: 'I see in them and myself the same old law'<sup>6</sup>. In this way, Whitman's poetry is frequently characterised by what I would describe as an ecstatic biophilia – a sense of profound identification and interconnection with all living things, as well as with the mother or lover earth who sustains them all. Whitman's vision of the earth is overwhelmingly sanguine. As he writes in another poem, entitled *Excelsior*: 'I am mad with devouring ecstasy to make joyous hymns for the whole earth'<sup>7</sup>.

Czesław Miłosz's poetry contains strong currents of a similar sentiment. Indeed, we might even say that it forms the guiding aspiration of his poetry: to produce songs in praise of the earth and its endless gifts. Like Whitman, Miłosz eroticises landscape – especially the landscapes of his native Lithuania – and casts his 'true vocation' as that of a poet-lover<sup>8</sup>. Miłosz's poetic speakers are constantly fascinated by the endless beauty and variety of the natural world, permeated with what he simply calls, in a very late poem, 'the Presence'<sup>9</sup>. Yet in Miłosz's case, this fascination is shaded by a powerful counter-current of world negation, a despairing condemnation of the natural world for its cruelty, meaninglessness and indifference to human concerns.

<sup>5</sup> W. Whitman, *Song of Myself, Leaves of Grass*, Boston 1881–1882, p. 46.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 39.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 363.

<sup>8</sup> Cz. Miłosz, *The Land of Ulro*, transl. L. Iribarne, New York 1985, p. 31.

<sup>9</sup> Cz. Miłosz, *Wiersze V*, Kraków 2009, p. 278.

In Miłosz's work – that of a doubting and heretically-inclined Catholic – this question is thoroughly entangled with theological problems of theodicy and an abiding interest in Gnosticism and Manichaeism<sup>10</sup>. To illustrate, I quote from a well-known poem, entitled 'To Mrs. Professor in Defense of My Cat's Honor and Not Only':

And such as cats are, all of Nature is.  
 Indifferent, alas, to the good and the evil.  
 Quite a problem for us, I am afraid.  
 Natural history has its museums,  
 But why should our children learn about monsters,  
 An earth of snakes and reptiles for millions of years?  
 Nature devouring, nature devoured,  
 Butchery day and night smoking with blood.  
 And who created it? Was it the good Lord?<sup>11</sup>

Above all, in this passage, we find clear signs of Miłosz's discomfort with the legacy of Charles Darwin and evolutionary theory. For Miłosz, the vision of life as a never-ending struggle for survival, whereby the strong subordinate or butcher the weak, is completely unacceptable to human morality. Human art ought not to praise or affirm such an earth, but instead it must remain resolutely anti-nature. Miłosz frequently describes the Darwinian vision as 'diabolical', suggesting a world either created or under the control of an evil god, or of Satan, 'the Prince of this World'<sup>12</sup>. Here he partly echoes the somewhat less seriously intentioned sentiments of Darwin himself, who famously wrote in a letter about the natural world unveiled by his work: 'What a book a Devil's chaplain might write on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering low & horridly cruel works of nature!'<sup>13</sup>

Miłosz did not question the scientific truth of evolutionary biology, but wished to point to the potentially dangerous moral and aesthetic consequences of accepting Darwin's explanation of how human beings – for all their art, culture, science, philosophy, religion, and morality – had come into existence. In the notes to his *Treatise on Poetry (Traktat poetycki, 1957)*, he explicitly suggests that 'Darwinism influenced both Nazism and Marxism. The former gave a racial interpretation to the theory of survival of the fittest; the latter applied

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<sup>10</sup> Numerous critics have commented on these questions. For instance, see: Z. Kaźmierczyk, *Dzielo demiurga: Zapis gnostyckiego doświadczenia egzystencji we wczesnej poezji Czesława Miłosza*, Gdańsk 2011; Ł. Tischner, *Sekrety manichejskich trucizn: Miłosz wobec zła*, Kraków 2001.

<sup>11</sup> Cz. Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems: 1931–2001*, New York 2003, p. 631. For the original Polish version, see: Cz. Miłosz, *Wiersze V*, p. 60.

<sup>12</sup> For instance, in a late poem from *Second Space (Druga przestrzeń, 2002)*, entitled *In Vain (Na próżno)*. See: Miłosz, *Wiersze V*, p. 224.

<sup>13</sup> Ch. Darwin, *Letter 1924 – Darwin, C.R. to Hooker, J.D., 13 July [1856]*. *Darwin Correspondence Project Database*, [www.darwinproject.ac.uk](http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk) [accessed: 21.07.2012].

the theory to the dying out of the less adapted social classes'<sup>14</sup>. According to Miłosz, Darwin's theory turns human beings into mere biological material ripe for extermination, while the entire natural world appears as a slaughterhouse. Therefore, in Miłosz's mind, modern evolutionary biology effectively exacerbates or reinvigorates the ancient theological problem of evil in the world that so troubled the dualist Christian heretics, thus giving rise to a new philosophical variation on the old 'hatred of evil matter' – a generalised world view he describes as 'Neo-Manichaeism'<sup>15</sup>. Miłosz himself at least partly subscribes to this pessimistic perspective.

Whitman's view of Darwin's theory was strikingly different. In one of his conversations with Horace Traubel, Whitman effused: 'It is beautiful – beautiful – such a confession as that: the most glorious and satisfying spiritual statement of the nineteenth century. Can the churches, the priests, the dogmatists, produce anything to match it? How can we ever forget Darwin?'<sup>16</sup>. In short, Darwin's scientific discoveries confirmed Whitman's own inclination to view the natural world as a vast tissue of interconnections, and thus to interpret his own existence as a happy link in an endless chain of life. In this light, evolution had culminated in Whitman's multitudinous 'self', as William Heyen suggests<sup>17</sup>. While Miłosz expresses horror at 'an earth of snakes and reptiles for millions of years', Whitman says gladly of the embryo of his own existence that 'monstrous sauroids transported it in their mouths and deposited it with care'<sup>18</sup>.

The question of precisely why this critical difference between the two poets exists is difficult to answer without entering into murky waters of biography. The central trauma of Miłosz's life was the period of the Second World War and the industrial exterminations of human beings that took place in the 'bloodlands' between Hitler and Stalin<sup>19</sup>. In later writings, he repeatedly speculates that 'the crime of genocide characteristic of our century has been a side effect of viewing man as a biological entity no less expendable than are the myriads of live entities squandered every second by Nature'<sup>20</sup>. Without the be-

<sup>14</sup> Cz. Miłosz, *Wiersze II*, Kraków 2002, p. 213.

<sup>15</sup> Cz. Miłosz, *Visions From San Francisco Bay*, transl. R. Lourie, New York 1975, p. 23.

<sup>16</sup> H.D. Wong, *This Old Theory Broach'd Anew: Darwinism and Whitman's Poetic Program*, "Walt Whitman Quarterly Review", Vol. 5, No. 4, Spring 1988, p. 29.

<sup>17</sup> W. Heyen, *Piety and Home in Whitman and Miłosz* [in:] *Walt Whitman of Mickle Street*, ed. G.M. Sill 1994, p. 63.

<sup>18</sup> W. Whitman, *Song of Myself*, p. 72.

<sup>19</sup> The term 'bloodlands' here comes from Timothy Snyder's influential study of the historical region – consisting of parts of present-day Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania – most cruelly effected by the murderous policies of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union in the 1930s and 1940s. See: T. Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, New York 2010.

<sup>20</sup> Cz. Miłosz, *The Fate of the Religious Imagination*, "New Perspectives Quarterly" 21.4 (Fall 2004), [http://www.digitalnpq.org/archive/2004\\_fall/28\\_milosz.html](http://www.digitalnpq.org/archive/2004_fall/28_milosz.html) [accessed: 21.03.2012].

lief in each human being's metaphysical significance as a unique child of God, 'all had been permitted' in the name of immanent political and ideological goals. For Miłosz, the animalization or biologisation of human beings wrought by Darwinian theory was partly responsible for this shift. Henceforth, any poetic worship of natural processes – or of nature as an abstract life-giving entity – would be highly suspicious. The terrible burden of twentieth-century history made poems in praise of nature possible only in an ironic mode that came to characterise Miłosz's poetic output. As in the wartime partner volumes *The World* (*Świat*) and *The Voices of Poor People* (*Głosy biednych ludzi*), any serene contemplation of being could only exist in dialogue with other words capturing the terrible suffering of human history and the natural world – both ruled by the same 'diabolical' Darwinian laws.

Of course, Whitman was quite familiar with the horrors of war, having witnessed first hand the shocking results of modern mechanised killing methods on American soldiers during the Civil War. Yet no nineteenth-century poet – however pessimistic about nature and human beings – could have predicted the scale of the twentieth-century slaughter in the heart of Europe, where the Germans exterminated millions of Jewish and other 'insects' using an industrial pesticide called Zyklon B. Whether or not we accept Miłosz's schematic theory that Darwinism and other forms of scientific materialism created the philosophical conditions for the Holocaust, the poet himself clearly believed that these events had inscribed an impassable line in the history of poetry. Accordingly, he looks back to Whitman's songs of praise with a critical eye. Yet this also implies a critique of his own poetic instincts – of his vocation as a 'lover' and his desire to hallow the 'eternal moment' in poetic language. The dividing line in poetic history crosses Miłosz's own work<sup>21</sup>. In *Unattainable Earth*, he introduces his own translations of Whitman into the poetic fabric of the volume, thereby involving Whitman in this poetic debate with himself. Whitman alternately expresses Miłosz's hopes and doubts, so that poetic translation functions as a means for the poet-translator to strengthen his own utterance by appropriating and adapting the utterance of another poet.

*Unattainable Earth* is one of Miłosz's most interesting collections. As he writes in the foreword, the volume represents an attempt to find what he had

<sup>21</sup> In fact, the conflict between sanguine and pessimistic visions of the natural world emerged as early as the Romantic era. We might even say that this conflicted attitude towards a two-faced nature represented one of the central tensions within Romantic writing. For instance, this ambivalence is strongly apparent in Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), in Schiller's *The Gods of Greece* (1788), in much of Blake's poetry, and in Percy Shelley's *Queen Mab* (1813) and *Prometheus Unbound* (1820). Even Wordsworth – the archetypal Romantic nature poet – is clearly conflicted in the 'Immortality Ode' (1807), the 'Lucy' poems and in certain sections of *The Prelude*. Arthur Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* (1819) is the era's prime philosophical expression of extreme pessimism towards the natural world. Miłosz's own ambivalence is partly a continuation of this Romantic dualism, especially indebted to Schopenhauer's work. In a late poem, Miłosz simply calls Schopenhauer 'my philosopher' (Cz. Miłosz, *Wiersze V*, p. 279).

earlier described as ‘a more spacious form that would be free from the claims of poetry and prose’<sup>22</sup>. This more spacious form is achieved via a patchwork of poetry and prose, already familiar from some of Miłosz’s earlier works, but also by commitment to a radical multi-voicedness or polyphony. Indeed, the volume comprises a mixture of Miłosz’s largely unrhymed poems, which speak through a range of different forms, voices and worldviews, brief prose commentaries also by the author, quotations from diverse sources including the *Corpus Hermeticum*, a Midrash reader, Simone Weil, Goethe, Charles Baudelaire, George Orwell, Emmanuel Swedenborg, Vladimir Solovyov, the author’s cousin, Oskar Miłosz, a personal letter from a friend, the painter and one-time Siberian exile Józef Czapski, as well as Miłosz’s own translations of three poems by D.H. Lawrence and twelve by Walt Whitman.

In fact, Miłosz’s poetry had been multi-voiced since his earliest works in the 1930s. This tendency was subsequently strengthened by his encounter with T.S. Eliot’s poetry, and much later – in the 1970s – by his preoccupation with Dostoevsky and Bakhtin’s polyphonic theory, partly in connection with his teaching duties in the Slavic Department at the University of California, Berkeley. Nevertheless, *Unattainable Earth* probably remains Miłosz’s most multi-voiced volume. Here he uses a wide range of different perspectives and linguistic registers to approach certain central questions that run through the whole collection.

In my view, the volume’s three primary themes are as follows: 1) What is the status of the earth? In other words, Miłosz seeks to resolve the conflict I have already outlined between two opposing visions of the earth: the first of a blessed, feminised realm of beauty and bounty – the world of ‘Innocence’, to use William Blake’s parlance; the second of a cruel and inhuman world of endless suffering devoid of any sanctifying significance – the world of ‘Experience’. Both visions appear in the collection, and it would be difficult to say whether one or the other finally prevails. 2) Can the earth be captured in words? The very title of the volume – *Nieobjęta ziemia*, which might be literally translated as *Unencompassed Earth* – suggests that the answer is a simple ‘no’. The earth cannot be encompassed, grasped or comprehended by human language, even when Miłosz seems to have thrown everything at the problem through sheer diversity of utterance. 3) What is the significance of Eros – and of the body – in relation to the first two questions? In other words, how are Eros and the body linked to our ability to affirm the earth and perhaps even the God who supposedly created it? Finally, how might Eros and the body be connected to the source of poetry itself? All three of these primary themes are relevant to Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, so it is no surprise to find his voice among the loudest within the cacophony of *Unattainable Earth*.

The first section of the collection – subtitled *Niewyrażone*, or *The Unexpressed* – is particularly concerned with the problem of whether words can ex-

<sup>22</sup> Cz. Miłosz, *Wiersze IV*, p. 7 [Quoted from: Cz. Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems*, p. 240].

press reality. Through various poems and prose commentaries, Miłosz seems to be debating this point with himself. On the one hand, his whole task as a poet is sustained by unflagging curiosity, an ardour for the concrete things of the world, and an irrepressible desire to capture them by casting them in poetic language – that is to say, in form. Yet this salutary act of hammering the fleeting moment into permanent form is doomed to failure, since the ephemeral content of ‘reality’ inevitably evades the poet’s verbal grasp. As Miłosz writes in a prose fragment from this section:

From my youth I have tried to seize with words the reality I have thought about as I have walked the streets of human cities and yet I have never succeeded, so that I consider every single poem of mine to be an advance on an unfinished work. Early on I discovered language’s poor fit with what we really are, that it is a great *make-believe* sustained by books and pages of newspaper print. And every attempt of mine to say something real has ended in the same way, in being driven back within the fences of form, like a sheep that has strayed from the flock<sup>23</sup>.

Language is eternally inadequate to the task. Indeed, later in the volume, Miłosz uses one of his favourite metaphors for this disjuncture – namely, the contrast between the various elaborate garments of women’s underwear and the truth of the naked body. The corset of language can tell us nothing of the fleshy, material truth beneath<sup>24</sup>. Nevertheless, in this discussion with himself, Miłosz seems to use Whitman’s writings as a counter-argument, offering fine translations of some of Whitman’s most viscerally ‘real’ poems, where words truly do seem to come close to capturing the essence of specific things in a concrete moment of time: *Sparks from the Wheel*, *Miracles*, *Cavalry Crossing a Ford*, and *To a Locomotive in Winter*. Here Whitman appears as a figure of great hope for Miłosz, a hope emblemised by the crucial lines of an unpublished poem from the HRC manuscript, which Miłosz translated into Polish elsewhere:

I am the poet of reality  
I say the earth is not an echo  
Nor man an apparition;  
But that all the things seen are real,  
The witness and albic dawn of things equally real  
I have split the earth and the hard coal and rocks and the solid bed of the sea  
And went down to reconnoitre there a long time,

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<sup>23</sup> Cz. Miłosz, *Wiersze IV*, p. 32.

<sup>24</sup> For instance, see *The Hooks of a Corset and Consciousness* (Cz. Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems*, p. 408–413; 431–434). Miłosz partly draws his interest in the parallel between art and feminine decoration from Charles Baudelaire’s famous essay *The Painter of Modern Life* – more specifically, from the section *In Praise of Cosmetics*. For direct evidence of this influence, see Miłosz’s introduction to a Polish edition of Baudelaire’s essay, entitled *Traktat przeciw naturze: Ch. Baudelaire, Malarz życia nowoczesnego*, transl. J. Guze, Gdańsk 1998.



And bring back a report,  
 And I understand that those are positive and dense every one  
 And that what they seem to the child they are<sup>25</sup>.

The poet appears here as a kind of journalist of being. In another poem from *Unattainable Earth*, Miłosz expresses much the same sentiment, surely borrowing directly from Whitman:

I think that I am here, on this earth,  
 To present a report on it, but to whom I don't know<sup>26</sup>.

In the later *Facing the River* (*Na brzegu rzeki*, 1995), Miłosz includes a poem springing from the very same idea, also bearing the title *Report* – though here again he seems to find any objective poetic journalism to be a hopeless project, since ‘to exist on the earth is beyond any power to name’<sup>27</sup>. Finally, the best he can manage in defence of the poetic word is to affirm: ‘At every sunrise I renounce the doubts of night and greet the new day of a most precious delusion’<sup>28</sup>. The practice of poetry is a Sisyphean task of naming the unnamable, expressing the inexpressible, creating a delusive and fragile human ‘reality’ constructed from words within the material reality of *physis*, in which everything ends in dissolution and death.

This brings me to Whitman's ‘As I Ebb'd With the Ocean of Life’, which gives expression precisely to ‘the doubts of night’ haunting much of Miłosz's writing, though generally much less prevalent in Whitman's work. Of course, the American poet's oeuvre includes certain more subdued sections – its ‘downcast hours’<sup>29</sup> – in contrast with the general mood of optimism, particularly when he writes of the Civil War. Indeed, we should expect no less of a poet so famously unafraid of self-contradiction. And yet ‘As I Ebb'd With the Ocean of Life’ still seems rather exceptional, sounding a note of desolate emptiness and despair largely unheard in Whitman's other writings. More significantly, it expresses crippling self-doubt, a flagging of the poet's faith in his own project, a terrible open-ended question about the ultimate meaninglessness of *Leaves of Grass* in the face of implacable death and a natural reality that words can only vainly attempt to glorify.

In *Unattainable Earth*, Miłosz's translation of the first two sections of Whitman's ‘As I Ebb'd With the Ocean of Life’ constitutes a key moment in the collection, expressing Miłosz's own most fundamental dilemmas as

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<sup>25</sup> W. Whitman, *Walt Whitman's Manuscript Drafts of 'Song of Myself'*, *Bailiwick: The University of Iowa Libraries*, <http://bailiwick.lib.uiowa.edu/whitman/specres07.html> [accessed: 28.05.2012].

<sup>26</sup> Cz. Miłosz, *Wiersze IV*, p. 67.

<sup>27</sup> Cz. Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems*, p. 590.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>29</sup> Here I refer to the poem *Yet, Yet, Ye Downcast Hours*. See: W. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, p. 341.

a poet, while also opening up an implicit critique of Whitman. The section of the volume in which Miłosz's translation of the poem appears finds him broadly tackling the problems of theodicy, the goodness of the world, and the provenance of evil. In one especially Manichaean fragment, he writes: 'A decent person cannot believe that a good God could have desired such a world'<sup>30</sup>. A few pages earlier, Whitman's uncharacteristic pessimism enters into Miłosz's ongoing dialectic. Indeed, the poet-translator seems consciously to turn Whitman against himself, throwing the American poet's moment of despair onto the scales against the world-affirming, reality-affirming detail of the earlier Whitman poems appearing in the collection. Just as Miłosz constantly second-guesses himself, he seems to have intentionally sought out the weakest point in the writings of this strapping, healthy, optimistic nineteenth-century American.

Certain specific characteristics of the translation magnify this critical effect. First of all, Miłosz only renders the first two sections of the poem, tellingly omitting the second two, in which Whitman's speaker reaches a position of humble acceptance – if not outright affirmation – of the natural reality. Thus Miłosz transposes the more mixed tones of Whitman's poem as a whole into a less nuanced expression of unadulterated pessimism, world negation and self-doubt. Moreover, the Polish translation of the titular line greatly increases the sense of the speaker's powerlessness before the inexorable forces of nature. In the original English title, the strong Whitmanian 'I' is the grammatical subject of the poem, even if the speaker feels himself 'ebbing' away with the tide. Yet Miłosz renders the title as 'Kiedy ocean życia zabierał mnie w odpływie', which we might translate back into English as 'When the Ocean of Life Took Me Away with the Tide'. Here the all-powerful ocean is the subject, while the human speaker is a mere object to be swept away by the flood. Miłosz's translation choice is not completely out of keeping with the general sense of the poem's first two sections, though the grammatical shift gives Whitman's theme a much more forceful expression. The strong, autonomous lyric subject gives way to an objectivised and weakened self – perhaps echoing a shift characteristic of much twentieth-century thought.

Miłosz's Polish version concludes with the second section, clearly the most pessimistic part of Whitman's poem – and perhaps even of his entire poetic oeuvre. I quote here in the original English:

As I wend to the shores I know not<sup>31</sup>,  
As I list to the dirge, the voices of men and women wreck'd,

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<sup>30</sup> Cz. Miłosz, *Wiersze IV*, p. 109.

<sup>31</sup> Here Miłosz makes a crucial error in his translation, simply repeating the 'shores I know' of the first section ('po brzegach znajomych'). In this way, he misses a vital shift in the poem, as Whitman moves from the familiar into entirely unfamiliar terrain. Miłosz may well be familiar with 'these shores' from his own poetic wanderings, but Whitman underlines that he has not visited them before. See: Cz. Miłosz, *Wiersze IV*, p. 101.

As I inhale the impalpable breezes that set in upon me,  
 As the ocean so mysterious rolls toward me closer and closer,  
 I too but signify at the utmost a little wash'd-up drift,  
 A few sands and dead leaves to gather,  
 Gather, and merge myself as part of the sands and drift.

O baffled, balk'd, bent to the very earth,  
 Oppress'd with myself that I have dared to open my mouth,  
 Aware now that amid all that blab whose echoes recoil upon me I  
 have not once had the least idea who or what I am,  
 But that before all my arrogant poems the real Me stands yet  
 untouch'd, untold, altogether unreach'd,  
 Withdrawn far, mocking me with mock-congratulatory signs and  
 bows,  
 With peals of distant ironical laughter at every word I have written,  
 Pointing in silence to these songs, and then to the sand beneath.

I perceive I have not really understood any thing, not a single  
 object, and that no man ever can,  
 Nature here in sight of the sea taking advantage of me to dart  
 upon me and sting me,  
 Because I have dared to open my mouth to sing at all<sup>32</sup>.

Here the speaker appears as a poetical failure, while all the areas in which Whitman might provide a hopeful counter-balance to Miłosz's own pessimistic inclinations are violently inverted. We find Whitman questioning his entire poetic project and Miłosz underlining Whitman's inadequacy in the terms of the central themes presented throughout *Unattainable Earth*. Whitman cannot provide the affirmative answers that Miłosz seeks. First of all, the poem clearly points to the impossibility of capturing in words either the reality of the natural world or of the real self, which is far removed from the 'precious delusion' – as Miłosz might put it – of signs and bows and words and elaborate corsets. The truth is mute and material, and it mocks the pretensions of poets. In fact, the original title of Whitman's poem from its earliest version published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1860 was *Bardic Symbols*. This section of the poem seems to establish that these 'symbols' do not exist – or exist only as a mocking delusion. Here nature is far from the forest of symbols and correspondences that Charles Baudelaire depicted in his famous *Correspondances* – first published only three years earlier in the first edition of *Les fleurs du mal* (1857). In Whitman's poem, human symbolic meanings are contrived, arbitrary, powerless and ultimately empty, while nature and the human self are nothing but chance configurations of meagre material washed up on the blank sand.

Secondly, in the face of this mocking reality, Whitman's experiments with form – the freedom of his verse, the length of his line, his breathless lists

<sup>32</sup> W. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, p. 202. For Miłosz's Polish translation, see: Cz. Miłosz, *Wiersze IV*, p. 101.

and catalogues, his mixture of biblical cadence and everyday language – are reduced to nothing more than ‘all that blab’. Whitman’s form is over-expansive, and reality escapes from it anyway, so that only ‘words, words, words’ remain. Curiously, a contemporary reviewer wrote the following critique of *Bardic Symbols* in 1860: ‘We think it has been an error in Whitman to discard forms and laws, for without them the poet diffuses’<sup>33</sup>. Miłosz evidently harbours similar anxieties about his own experiments with a ‘more spacious’ and potentially diffusive form. Hence the very last lines of *Unattainable Earth* make an appeal for a tighter, more compressed type of form:

To make one’s home in a sentence, which would be as if forged from metal.  
Why such adeseire? Not so as to delight anybody. Not so as to preserve one’s name  
in the memory of one’s descendants. An unnameable need for order, rhythm, form;  
three words we hurl against chaos and nothingness<sup>34</sup>.

Thirdly, Whitman’s optimistic vision of a feminised ‘voluptuous cool-breath’d earth’ metamorphoses here into the feminine ocean – the ‘fierce old mother’ – laving the ravaged shores of a masculinised land. Nature ‘darts upon’ and ‘stings’ the speaker, who is ‘baffled, balk’d, bent to the very earth’. The speaker is nothing in the face of this indifferent ocean of death. By cutting off his translation prematurely, Miłosz denies the speaker the acceptance of this nothingness that seems to follow in the last two sections of the full poem. In doing so, Miłosz almost seems to be posing a series of questions to Whitman in the American poet’s own words. How can you praise the earth when everything on it ends in monstrous and meaningless death? How can you sing your biophilic songs to all that lives when living things – including poets – are nothing but temporary accretions of matter thrown up on the sands of time by the random and senseless processes of evolution? How can you build your endless walls of words when the formlessness of your poetry must ultimately collapse under its own weight into meaningless babble and blab? For Miłosz – at least in this mood – to write a truly human poetry means to create order and form, regardless of how adequate or inadequate to reality that form may be, to create a reality within a reality, and not simply to make endless lists of things that exist.

This implied critique – shaped by translation choices and the poem’s placement within the collection as a whole – stands as an interesting example of a twentieth-century poet’s reservations about Whitman’s achievement, cast in Whitman’s own words. The modern poet cannot possibly share Whitman’s characteristic sanguinity about the physical world, while words themselves have long since ceased to resonate as they once did. Yet Miłosz clearly directs these criticisms above all at himself. He translates Whitman’s words – manipulating them as he does so – in order to express profound doubts about his own

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<sup>33</sup> W.D. Howells, *Bardic Symbols*, “The Daily Ohio State Journal” (28 March 1860), p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Cz. Miłosz, *Wiersze IV*, p. 139.

poetic project. Quite literally, Whitman speaks Miłosz's language. The Polish poet sees a meaningless world of self-devouring material moving in tidal cycles of death and renewal. He sees the powerlessness of poetry to alter these inexorable laws or even to describe the world determined by them. His own poetry appears as nothing but 'all that blab' or as vain verbal constructions grappling with a deeper reality he characterises in a later poem simply as *This (To)*: 'And I confess my ecstatic praise of being / Might just have been exercises in the high style. / Underneath was this, which I do not attempt to name'<sup>35</sup>.

Torn from his original poetic context and subordinated to a different set of purposes, an uncharacteristically pessimistic Whitmanian speaker adds his voice to Miłosz's in *Unattainable Earth*. This transposition or even appropriation of the other's utterance opens broader questions about the general character of Miłosz's much vaunted multi-voicedness. Is his poetry truly hospitable to other voices or does the dominant voice of the Miłoszean poetic subject inevitably subjugate and distort them? In *Unattainable Earth*, Miłosz uses Whitman to phrase his own suspicion of the physical world and his profound doubts about the use or power of the poetic word. At the same time, the collection expresses great hope in a 'poetry of the future' – a poetry that will express the 'rhythms of the body'. *Unattainable Earth* is filled with pessimism about the physical world, yet it still remains Miłosz's most strongly corporeal and erotic collection<sup>36</sup>. In this sense, the Polish poet's concord with the positive dimension of Whitman's poetics is no less evident than his pessimism. In *Father Ch., Many Years Later*, Miłosz reveals the body as the very node linking the human and divine, so that the hope for immortality and the sense of God's real existence express themselves, above all, through its pulsating rhythms:

And yet I could not distinguish Him from the rhythm of my blood  
 And felt false reaching beyond it in prayer.  
 I was not a spiritual man but flesh-enraptured,  
 Called to celebrate Dionysian dances<sup>37</sup>.

Whitman's presence is palpable here. Yet the final translation from the American poet to appear in *Unattainable Earth* – a page after 'As I Ebb'd With the Ocean of Life' – sounds a somewhat less ecstatic note. In *The Last Invocation*, Whitman's speaker describes the soul's 'tender' parting from the body at the end of life: 'From the keep of the well-clos'd doors, / Let me be wafted'<sup>38</sup>. This is no Gnostic escape from the prison or tomb of the flesh, but rather a wistful parting with a beloved home, 'the powerful, fortress'd house'. Miłosz may

<sup>35</sup> Cz. Miłosz, *New and Collected*, p. 663.

<sup>36</sup> According to Andrzej Franaszek, this was perhaps the result of a new love affair that had entered the poet's life in this period. See: A. Franaszek, *Miłosz: Biografia*, Kraków 2011, p. 704–705.

<sup>37</sup> Cz. Miłosz, *New and Collected*, p. 436–437.

<sup>38</sup> W. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, p. 346. For Miłosz's version, see: Cz. Miłosz, *Wiersze IV*, p. 104.

even add an erotic element, since Whitman's original first-person singular becomes plural: 'We should slip out without a murmur'<sup>39</sup>. The lovers seem to part with bodily existence together: 'Let us rise up into the air'. Here Miłosz uses – or, once again, adapts – Whitman's warm tone of calm acceptance to express the central ambivalence of *Unattainable Earth*. The body and soul must part ways – as must the lovers – but they are by no means at odds with each other. Miłosz yearns to rise above the body and above the suffering earth, yet he still feels the gravitational pull of desire, physical existence and the pulsation of his own blood – whose rhythm gives rise to poetry. As Miłosz-Whitman suggests, Eros and the body are mortal and vulnerable, but they are also strong:

Tenderly! Be not impatient!  
 (Strong is your hold, O mortal flesh!  
 Strong is your hold, O love.)

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<sup>39</sup> Cz. Miłosz, *Wiersze IV*, p. 104.