

ANNA CETERA

## *OCCULTA SAPIENTIAE. CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ TRANSLATES PSALM 51*

---

**Abstract:** The essay focuses on Czesław Miłosz’s translation of Psalm 51, one of the most celebrated penitential psalms. Unlike the medieval practice of illuminating books of psalms, where the images offered a vivid and concrete narrative context for the pleas and lamentations, Miłosz aims to highlight the universal and archetypal dimension of King David’s prayers. He sets out to create a new hieratic Polish style to reconcile liturgical use with the evocative qualities and unique prosodies of Hebrew poetry, without sacrificing a coherent theological interpretation. To reproduce the characteristic repetitions and parallelisms, Miłosz draws lexical and syntactic inspiration from the earliest Polish translations of the psalms, notably the *Psalterz Puławski* (Psalter of Puławy, late fifteenth century). Ultimately, his translation forms a complex amalgam, bringing together the religious intuitions of Judaism, the hieratic tradition of the Polish language and the semantic intensity of Miłosz’s own poetry.

**Keywords:** Czesław Miłosz, translation, the Bible, the Book of Psalms, Psalm 51

In May 2005 the Princes Czartoryski Museum and Library in Krakow held an excellent exhibition of manuscripts containing images of King David.<sup>1</sup> Dating from the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries, the exhibits included bibles, prayer books, psalters and books of hours, each contained in a separate display case and accentuated by soft spot lighting. To a non-specialist, time had obscured the differences of technique and style: the colourful miniatures appeared to be no more than a mediaeval reflection of biblical

---

<sup>1</sup> Entitled “Wizerunek króla Dawida w średniowiecznych rękopisach iluminowanych Biblioteki Książąt Czartoryskich” (Depictions of King David in Mediaeval Illuminated Manuscripts in the Library of the Czartoryski Family), the exhibition, which comprised ten displays, was held at the Czartoryski Museum in Krakow on 10–22 May 2005.

times. Given the wide time span of the two periods, the exhibition was an image of one bygone era constructed by another.

Mediaeval miniatures call for a special kind of gaze. They cannot be taken in at a glance, the eye skimming across books aglow with colour in the showcases of a dark museum room. An illumination must be studied intently until its miniature world fills our field of vision and completely blocks our own world from view. As an art form, it requires a focused intensity before it reveals its wealth of detail to our gaze. Miniatures take hidden object games to a whole new dimension.

The exhibition centred on King David, one of the Old Testament's most vivid figures: a divided character with a unique combination of lyrical and epic qualities. Priest and ruler, politician and fornicator, artist and lover, David is, in a word, a poet, and his poems form a unique counterpoint to the chronicles of his royal achievements and failures. The Psalms of David are a palimpsest whose most ancient layers sometimes defy linguistic analysis and obscure the distinction between David's own work and other people's imitations of earlier pieces. David emerges from the mists of time as a capacious archetype of the believer: a man with a rich and intense inner life whose religiousness expresses itself through continuous dialogue with Jahwe.

Experts in book history point out that illustrations of mediaeval religious texts were meant to support the theological interpretations which linked them to the text. However, the illuminations' vibrancy and artistry also endowed them with a certain autonomy as stand-alone creations and, on occasion, as devotional objects in their own right. Importantly, illuminations also filled narrative niches by aiding the reception of biblical texts, particularly those relating to scenes from the chronicles.<sup>2</sup> This relationship is best reflected in the fact that images were placed inside decorative initials. As a result, the image provides a context for the narrative; the miniature face becomes that of the character, the painted landscape in the background becomes the world of the story. An arc could be traced from the earlier miniatures to the panel paintings which replaced them in the late Gothic period, and, later still, to Flemish masters such as Campin, Memling or the van Eyck brothers, who painted their Annunciations with

---

<sup>2</sup> Exhibition curator Katarzyna Balus writes about the connections between the theological dimension, the devotional function and the narrative element in a brochure published by the Czartoryski Museum.

mediaeval church spires in the background, an artistic breakthrough which paved the way for modern realist art.

David receiving anointment of oil from Samuel, David fighting Goliath, David watching Bathsheba; removed from their original contexts and neatly arranged on display, the mediaeval depictions of King David intrigue us with bright, vibrant colour and an element of sensuality which mediaeval limners had injected into the religious texts. This sensuality is a surprising discovery, bringing into sharp relief the extent to which modern readers are incapable of grasping the original context of the Psalms, which today are perceived, first and foremost, as liturgical texts, i.e. as sacred works. The light reflecting off the gilt volumes in a dim museum room produces an atmosphere of intense intimacy more reminiscent of storytelling than prayer. Positioned alongside the image, the texts spring to life: the characters become flesh, the action is dynamic. There is Abisag in David's bed, there is Bathsheba at her bath and David playing a carillon of bells... A fifteenth-century French book of hours shows the penitent sinner and his lover, a juxtaposition which dramatises David's sin through a surprisingly detailed and realistic depiction of an attractive woman in her bath.<sup>3</sup> This unique intersection between the sacred and the profane reduces the distance created by time and liturgy, and brings to light the voluptuous sensuality of David's sin, normally obscured by the remoteness of time and the religious nature of liturgy. The story becomes vivid: the miniature furnishes it with a time, a place, and a tangible interpersonal dynamic, ineluctably shifting the image from archetype to the realm of the specific.

This latter aspect in particular seems to run counter to the modern view, which sees the Psalms as a collective product subject to multiple reworkings and adaptations over time: a text created by many authors working in a variety of settings. Informed by varieties of individual belief and artistic sensibility, the Psalms are supposed to have been a kind of semantic skeleton gradually fleshed out by generations of poets, nullifying any attempt at historical specificity. From this perspective, the ontological core of the Psalms was, and must remain, archetypal.

In his translation of the Psalms, Czesław Miłosz gives the biographical approach a wide berth. To Miłosz, the Psalms are primarily sacred works, their fervent reception over the millennia every bit as important as their

---

<sup>3</sup> *Book of Hours*, Tours, France, ca. 1500, illuminator from the circle of Jean Poyer, page 213, full-page miniature *Kapriel Bestabe* [Bathsheba at Her Bath], Ms. Czart. 3020 I; description as per exhibition catalogue.

enigmatic origins. His thinking is exemplified by the preface to the Paris edition of his translation. The preface by Father Józef Sadzik recounts his memories from the Katholikon of the Great Lavra monastery on Mount Athos: the monks gathering at dawn to sing psalms in the Greek of the Septuagint, the air heavy with incense (Sadzik 1982: 10). In this setting, writes Sadzik, the Psalms seemed proof of the supernatural continuity of the Church, while also prompting a question: “With a composition process spanning several centuries (probably as long as seven hundred years), how could works of poetry emerge with so much spiritual logic and unity of inspiration?” (Sadzik 1982: 9). According to Sadzik, the reason is that the Psalms share a certain theological interpretation of history, moving effortlessly between the individual identity of the poet and the collective identity of Israel, and also that they share in the direct nature of prayer dialogue. To a poet and translator, this latter quality is particularly noteworthy. The universality of the Psalms comes precisely from their poignant descriptions of concrete situations, descriptions whose emotional potential makes it possible for readers to connect with the experience no matter how different their own circumstances. Years later, Miłosz offered a much simpler reflection on the Psalms. In one of his last books, he wrote:

Some people find the Psalms of David, which I have translated into Polish, an aid to prayer; others find them repellent because they are almost completely self-serving. In times of persecution the Almighty is called upon to act as a preserver – to bring victories, to vanquish enemies and to give power and glory to the King. It takes an unwavering need for contrition before the Divine Majesty to overlook the infantile ruses contained in the Psalms.

And what about King David, making the highly unlikely assumption that he actually wrote the Psalms? I’ve known a woman, an avid reader of the Bible, who used to say that she read the Bible because it treated our most terrible sins as the ordinary fabric of life. Take David, who stole another man’s wife and had her husband killed, and yet was forgiven (Miłosz 1997: 38).

As he weighed his translation strategy, Miłosz came to attach a great importance to the Psalm’s reception in the target culture: primarily, the liturgical tradition. Miłosz compared sacred texts to pebbles in a stream, their rough sides gradually worn smooth as their sharp and alien meanings are tamed to become gently familiar (Miłosz 1982: 324). When dealing with a sacred text, the translator must refresh the reading experience without undermining the earlier versions or violating the unity of interpretation. Obviously, it is not always easy to reconcile a new translation with the ne-

bulous semantics of the original on the one hand, and a robust tradition on the other. One example is Miłosz's commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes, where the famous "vanity" in his translation briefly dances in the wind as *dym marny* ("futile smoke"), as fleeting and intangible as the Hebrew concept of *havel*, before it ultimately reconnects with the ground as the more ordinary *marność*, a more abstract and judgemental Polish equivalent of the Latin *vanitas*.<sup>4</sup>

The liturgical meaning of the Psalms stirs the philologist in Miłosz to search for the right style. The poet sees the biblical text as providing fertile ground for creating a Polish style which is "elevated, hieratic and liturgical; rooted in the past yet acceptable to the modern linguistic sensibility." (Miłosz 1982: 47). Miłosz combines this sense of duty to the Polish language with a unique alertness to the internal dynamics of Hebrew poetry. His translation attempts to find a language which might reflect Hebrew prosody while creating the fundamentals of a new elevated style for Polish poetics. Miłosz's attitude towards archaism in translation is also characteristic. In forging a new variety of a dignified, inspired sacred style, Miłosz states that the new style should be derived from old Polish sources, particularly the language of the fifteenth-century manuscript translation of the Psalms known as the Psalter of Puławy; he steers clear, however, of actual lexical or syntactic archaisms.<sup>5</sup> He looks to the rudimentary Hebrew prosody and to the morphological kernels of the early Polish translations to find a poetic model which is at once strong, elevated and concise; a literal kind of poetry, as it were.

Years later, Miłosz revisited the idea of having to struggle with words in an essay from *Ogród sztuk* [Garden of Arts]. In a dialogue with Jan Darowski (author of a column on Slavic languages in *Wiadomości*, a London-based Polish-language émigré weekly), Miłosz weaves Darowski's

<sup>4</sup> Miłosz discusses the challenges involved in translating the Hebrew concept of *havel* in its sensual and figurative senses in *Ogród nauk* [Garden of Arts]. According to Miłosz, the Polish *marność* ("vanity") is an example of an expression so strongly rooted in tradition as to successfully resist any change in the interest of linguistic fidelity (Miłosz 1998: 268–269).

<sup>5</sup> On more than one occasion, Miłosz emphasised his indebtedness to the bilingual edition of the Bible published in Jakov Cylkow's translation in 1883–1905 (a translation project which was less influenced by the Latin syntax than usual), and to the Psalter of Puławy, which is held by the Czartoryski Museum in Krakow. Made at the turn of the fifteenth century, it was a copy of an older manuscript which may have served as a model for the *Psalterz Floriański* (The Saint Florian Psalter), a late fourteenth-century manuscript of the Psalms in Latin, Polish and German (cf. Wydra 2004: 68–69).

phrase into his commentary: “The Polish language (...) undercuts the gravity of the human encounter with life by taking concepts which sound elevated in other languages and forcing them to wear a fool’s cap of [fricative] consonants, such as *ś, ć, sz* or *cz*.” (Miłosz 1998: 141). The same idea reappears in his *Piesek przydrożny* [Road-side Dog]: “I cannot bring myself to forgive my unknown predecessors who failed to put the Polish language in order, and bequeathed to me the phonetic mess of all those *prze, przy,* and *ści* sounds.” (Miłosz 1998: 73). To retain the sentence rhythms in his Polish translation, Miłosz continually struggled with a language that had strings of hissing consonants, many polysyllabic words and a rhythmical pattern where the stress usually falls on the penultimate syllable (Miłosz 1998: 147). Miłosz believed the oldest Polish translations to have been more rhythmically effective, which made him “doubtful about liturgical ceremonies held in such an attenuated language,” (Miłosz 1998: 148) and spurred his ambition to develop a new style of hieratic Polish. “Inasmuch as possible,” writes Miłosz, “this should be achieved not through archaic diction but through placing old and new language on an equal footing.” (Miłosz 1998: 267). To Miłosz, that was not to say that language should be “stylised to appear old-fashioned,” since the kind of Polish capable of “supporting the weight of biblical texts” did not yet exist and needed to be “created” first. But what does it actually mean to *create* a language?

To examine Miłosz’s translation process, let us turn to Psalm 51, the voice of the penitent church, which has a special place in Catholic liturgy (the psalm opens the psalmody of the Morning Prayer for Fridays). To stick to Miłosz’s metaphorical image of pebbles in a stream, this is a text which deserves to be turned in our hands and scanned from every side: perhaps the bumps of the rough surfaces can help reveal the poetic method. Although critiquing a translation without a proper philological analysis of the original verges on methodological anathema, we must bear in mind that the natural point of reference in the reception of canonical texts often lies less with the original text than with its early or parallel translations. In this sense, my approach is in fact similar to the translation strategy taken by Miłosz, who deflected potential criticism in his introduction to *The Book of Luminous Things* (itself a collection of indirect translations) by declaring that he takes an invariably “positive outlook on the deliberate use of imperfect solutions” (Miłosz 2000: 6).

Biographically, Psalm 51 marks one of the most poignant narrative contexts, i.e. Chapter 11 of the Second Book of Samuel. As his troops are fac-

ing the Ammonites in battle, David remains in Jerusalem to seduce Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah. When Bathsheba conceives, David summons her husband to Jerusalem so that Bathsheba can avoid accusations of infidelity. Mindful of the ban on sexual intercourse in wartime, Uriah refuses to enter the house, and David sends him to certain death in battle. Uriah is killed and David marries Bathsheba, who gives birth to a son. Shortly thereafter, Nathan the Prophet visits the court and asks David to sit in judgement on a case of a rich and ruthless man who has taken a poor man's only sheep. When David unflinchingly condemns the man, Nathan reveals the analogy, and delivers a prophecy of terrible punishment that awaits the king. "I have sinned against the Lord," David confesses spontaneously, and his admission is met by forgiveness: "The Lord also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die" (2 Sm 12,13 KJV). However, Nathan still believes the child to be doomed. This may be the precise point at which we are taken from the Second Book of Samuel into the world of Psalm 51: "David therefore besought God for the child; and David fasted, and went in, and lay all night upon the earth" (2 Sm 12,16, KJV). However, the child dies on the seventh day, and David ends his fast of repentance. He returns to Bathsheba, who soon gives birth to another son, Solomon. With Solomon in mind, David would years later establish hereditary succession without primogeniture.<sup>6</sup>

Psalm 51 is a dramatic confession by a concrete individual but it is also a gem of Catholic liturgy, its sacred status perhaps more important than its presumable biographical origins. We do not actually know who wrote Psalm 51. Was it David, or a nameless poet seeking to evoke David's feelings, or perhaps, unquantifiably but significantly, Jerome, Jakub Wujek and the generations of translators who have worked the psalms over the centuries like stained-glass windows, swapping and replacing the pieces of colourful glass mounted in an unchanging framework of lead comes?<sup>7</sup> The basic psychological situation – remorse for an evil deed – may be universal to the human condition, but the description itself is derived from a specifically Jewish sensitivity. It throbs with the pulse of Hebrew po-

---

<sup>6</sup> All of David's elder sons (Amnon, Absalom and Adoniah) rebelled against their father and died violent deaths. Solomon had no military talents but he was a sage and a judge, which made him "the only one of the sons capable of discharging the religious duties of kingship which David evidently felt essential to preserve the Israelite constitutional balance." (Johnson 1987: 58).

<sup>7</sup> I owe the analogy between translating psalms and making stained-glass windows to Cybulski (2002: 15–16).

etry and weaves together vague abstract concepts and imagery of unknown rituals. Such a text should not be translated as a mere relic of the Jewish religion; it must also take the form of a sacred text for modern sensibilities, often to be used in prayer by people unfamiliar with the linguistic and historical niceties of conventional pleas for cleansing or the pious tautologies of Hebrew poetry. The sequential structure of the Psalms is built on symmetrical, semantically similar lines, where God is asked to blot out transgression, cleanse sin and wash out iniquity through reiterated pleas, entreaties and lamentations. The Lord has to be begged, repeatedly and in a variety of ways, to uphold the spirit, to provide strength, and not to cast the sinner away. Those readers who embark on a close reading of the text are constantly buffeted by the semantic fluctuations of its strings of synonyms, such as iniquity – transgression – sin. And, as if the strain imposed on human identity by the dualism of body and soul were not vexing enough, the text bursts with rough, obsessively metonymic Hebraisms: the mouth “shows forth praise,” the bones are “broken,” the entire body seems to be a fragmented thing with a wayward life of its own. Deep beneath the surface, two major philosophical and religious systems grind against each other like tectonic plates: *nefesh* versus *psyche*, *ruah* versus *pneuma*. How does one go about translating such worlds and otherworlds? This is Psalm 51 as translated into Polish by Czesław Miłosz:

1. Przewodnikowi chóru. Psalm Dawida.
2. Gdy go odwiedził Natan prorok po tym, jak wszedł był do Batszeby.
3. Zlituj się nade mną, Boże, wedle miłosierdzia Twego\* i w wielkiej dobroci Twojej zmaż moje winy.
4. Obmyj mnie całego z nieprawości mojej\* i z grzechu mojego oczyść mnie.
5. Albowiem znam winy moje\* i mój grzech jest zawsze przede mną.
6. Tobie, Tobie samemu zgrzeszyłem\* i zło w oczach Twoich czyniłem,\* abyś okazał się sprawiedliwy w Twoim wyroku\* i prawy w Twoim sądzie.
7. Zaiste, urodziłem się w nieprawości i w grzechu poczęła mnie matka moja.
8. Zaiste, Ty żądasz, abym miał prawdę w głębi serca,\* w ukryciu uczysz mnie mądrości.
9. Pokrop mnie hizopem, a będę oczyszczony,\* obmyj mnie, a nad śnieg bielszym się stanę.
10. Daj mi usłyszeć radość i wesele,\* niech rozradują się kości moje, któreś pokruszył.
11. Odwróć Twoje oblicze od grzechów moich\* i zmaż wszystkie moje winy.
12. Serce czyste stwórz we mnie, Boże,\* i ducha mocy odnów we wnętrznościach moich.



13. Nie odrzucaj mnie sprzed oblicza Twego\* i ducha Twego świętego nie zabieraj ode mnie.
14. Przywróć mi radość Twojego zbawienia\* i duch gorliwości niechaj mnie wspiera.
15. A będę przestępców nauczać dróg Twoich\* i grzesznicy do Ciebie powrócą.
16. Ocal mnie od krwawej winy\* Boże, Boże mojego zbawienia, \* aby język mój wysławiał sprawiedliwość Twoją.
17. Panie, wargi moje otwórz,\* i niech moje usta opowiadają chwałę Twoją.
18. Bo nie pragniesz ofiar, abym je składał,\* całopalenia nie żądasz.
19. Ofiarą moją, Panie, jest duch bolejący,\* sercem bolejącym i skruszonym nie pogardzisz, Boże.
20. Dam pomyślność w dobroci Twojej Syjonowi,\* odbuduj mury Jeruzalem.
21. Wtedy upodobasz sobie w ofiarach sprawiedliwych,\* w darach palonych i całopaleniach,\* wtedy cielce złożą na Twoim ołtarzu.

The very opening verses are characterised by closely symmetrical synonymous verses, a device often found in Hebrew poetry, but which goes against the grain of the Polish language, whose aversion to repetition goes back to the Renaissance. Structurally, the two opening verses rely on mirror-like inversion: *zlituj się (...)* *boś miłosierny* (“have mercy (...) for you are merciful”), *boś dobry (...)* *zmaż winy* (“because you are good (...) blot out my transgressions”); the next two verses are semantically parallel: *obmyj* (“wash”) (...) *oczyść* (“cleanse”); *bo znam winę* (“for I know my transgression”) (...) *bo widzę grzech* (“for I see my sin”). Characteristically, Miłosz shapes the lines carefully as stand-alone rhythmical units. After the hiss and rustle of the sibilants in Verse 4 we come across a rare example of a partially iambic stress pattern in Verse 5 (*albowiem znam winy moje* – “for I know my transgressions”), a rare occurrence in the Polish language, which seems to emphasise the heavy weight of the transgression, just like the sudden absence of fricatives suggests that we have moved from communicating in whispers to an open, breast-beating confession. The translator’s struggle with the rules of Hebrew poetry comes into sharp relief when we compare the same passage in Jan Kochanowski’s sixteenth-century translation:

Boże w miłosierdziu swoim nieprzebrany,  
 U Twych nóg upadam ja, człowiek stroskany;  
 Smiłuj się nade mną, zetrzy moje złości,  
 Omyj mnie, oczyść mię z moich wszeteczności!

(God of infinite mercy,  
I fall to Thy feet a troubled man;  
Have mercy on me, blot out my iniquities,  
Wash me, cleanse me of my iniquities!)

Beautiful as it is, Kochanowski's verse disposes of the Hebrew symmetries and parallelisms, and replaces the references to ritual purification with a direct, dynamic scene of a sinner throwing himself at God's feet, bringing to mind the New Testament sinners who seek forgiveness from God incarnate. It should be pointed out that Kochanowski's daring and evocative adaptation has no precedent among the earlier translations. *Psalterz Puławski*, Miłosz's favoured source of inspiration, has the following translation of the opening lines:

Smiłuj się nade mną, Boże, podług wielkiego miłosierdzia twego.  
I podług mnostwa lutowania twego zgładź lichotę moją!  
Szyrzej mię omyj od złości mojej i od grzechu mego oczyści mię,  
Bo złość moją ja znają i grzech moj przeciwko mnie jest zawždy.

(Take pity on me, O God, by Thy great mercy.  
And by the plenitude of Thy compassion wipe out my wretchedness.  
Wash me thoroughly of my iniquity and cleanse me of my sin,  
For I know my iniquity, and my sin is always before me.)

This passage is like Miłosz's in terms of the relationships between the verses and the attention to stress patterns. Where the two translations part ways is in the characteristic lexical archaisms which appear only in the older translation, with words like *lutowanie* ("compassion"), *lichota* ("iniquity" or "wretchedness") or *złość* ("iniquity"). In modern Polish, *złość* has undergone a semantic shift and is now closer in meaning to "anger" (*gniew*), though *złość* feels more trivial, a feeling more akin to "annoyance." Notably, however, *złość* is etymologically rooted in the word *zło* ("evil"), whereas its synonyms, such as *nieprawość* or *niegodziwość* ("iniquity," "wickedness"), are essentially negations of virtue, a state of "non-righteousness" (*nie-* meaning "not" in Polish). In a sense, the choice of word reflects a certain way of understanding evil, where evil is seen as the absence of good.

Line 6 is also interesting in terms of sound effects: *Tobie, Tobie samemu zgrzeszyłem\* i zło w/ oczach Twoich czynilem,\* abyś okazał się sprawiedliwy w Twoim wyroku\* i prawy w Twoim sądzie* ("Against you, you alone have I sinned, and committed evil in your sight, so you could prove just in

your sentence, and righteous in your judgement”). What is striking about this passage is its profusion of personal and possessive pronouns in the second person singular (*Tobie, Tobie, Twoich, Twoim, Twoim*), a trait not to be found in any other translation.<sup>8</sup> Again, the overall structure is based on synonymous parallels, emphasising the iniquity of sin, which is treated as perpetrated against God and, as it were, in plain view of God. The directness of the address suggests not only that the dialogue is highly intimate, but also that the penitent sinner undergoes an essential change of heart by rejecting a sinfully self-centred perspective to find an ultimate point of reference in God, to whom he directs his thoughts and pleas. Although the repeated pronouns violate Miłosz’s principle of succinctness – *Tobie zgrzeszyłem, na Twoich oczach, w Twoim wyroku, w Twoim sądzie* – rhetorically they provide an admirably simple demonstration of how David comes to regard his own actions in a different light.<sup>9</sup>

Verse 7 is a difficult passage; the words are simple but the theological interpretation is complex: *Zaiste, urodziłem się w nieprawości i w grzechu poczęła mnie matka moja.* (“Truly I was born in iniquity, and conceived in sin by my mother”). In Miłosz’s translation the slightly archaic word *zaiste* (“truly” or “verily”) introduces a note of intellectual reflection into a line which, interpreted literally, could suggest that David, son of Jesse of Bethlehem, was an illegitimate child, or else imply a blanket disapproval of sexuality. The Catholic interpretation of this passage alludes to the dogma of the original sin rather than to David’s particular situation, and some translations follow suit by evoking the human condition. This is the course Kochanowski takes in his translation: *Mnie-ć jeszcze złość w matce przeklęta zastała,/ Mnie-ć grzech jeszcze w mleku matka podawała* (“I was afflicted by the curse of iniquity in my mother/ I was nursed on the sin

<sup>8</sup> Compare the Millennium Bible: *Tylko przeciw Tobie zgrzeszyłem/ i uczyniłem, co złe jest przed Tobą,/ tak że się okazujesz sprawiedliwy w swym wyroku/ i prawy w swym sądzie* (“I have sinned against none other than you, / and did what was evil before you/ so you have proved just in your sentence / and righteous in your judgement”) or the essentially similar breviary version: *Przeciwko Tobie samemu zgrzeszyłem\*/ i uczyniłem, co złe jest przed Tobą,/ Abyś okazał się sprawiedliwy w swym wyroku\*/ i prawy w swoim sądzie.* Roman Brandstaetter translates this passage as *Przeciw samemu Tobie zgrzeszyłem/ i uczyniłem zło przed Twoimi oczami,/ abyś okazał sprawiedliwość w swoim wyroku/ i prawość w swoim sądzie* (“I have sinned against you alone/ and did evil before your eyes/ so you show justice in your sentence/ and righteousness in your judgement”)

<sup>9</sup> Jan Błoński mentions the “astounding frequency” of pronouns in Miłosz’s translation, and points out how the pronouns give a specificity and concreteness to the objects and concepts in the passage.

in my mother's milk"). The modern Polish breviary translation has: *Oto urodziłem się obciążony winą\* i jako grzesznika poczęła mnie matka* ("For I was born burdened with guilt/ and my mother conceived me a sinner"). The standard modern Catholic translation, *Biblia Tysiąclecia* (The Millennium Bible), renders the passage much like Miłosz, except for the construction *poczęła mnie matka moja*, which sounds curiously pleonastic in Polish, but occurs in the oldest translations, including *Psalterz Puławski*, *Psalterz Floriański* and Jakub Wujek's 1594 *Psalterz Dawidów*.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps by accident, this inverted word order, unnatural and archaic, brings out a different kind of similarity. By pointing out his sinful conception, David not only describes the sin with which he is, as it were, "endowed" in his mother's womb, but also makes reference to his current situation: after all, he is himself a father, begging God to spare the life of a child who was literally begotten in sin. But Verse 7 is also not a preface to a justification of human sinfulness, or to a plea for a child's life. On the contrary, it precedes one of the most difficult passages in the psalm, bracketed by the anaphoric use of *zaiste* ("truly"): *Zaiste, Ty żądasz, abym miał prawdę w głębi serca,\* w ukryciu uczysz mnie mądrości*. ("Truly, you demand that I keep truth deep in my heart, you teach me wisdom in hiding").

This is a theological reflection which plays a central role in the structure of the psalm. The observation not only links David's confession with the litany of pleas which follows, but also touches on some of the deepest truths in the relationship between God and man. Although Verse 1 points out that people are inherently susceptible to sin, Verse 2 stops short of concluding that sin is therefore justified. God suffers corrupted nature to exist and endows man with a gift which balances out his inherent propensity to evil by making him capable of undergoing conversion and living a life of righteousness. The logic of this balance is largely reflected in the grammar of the passage, notably in the way it interprets time through the use of grammatical tense. In Miłosz's translation God **demands** that man should hold truth deep in his heart, but also **teaches** man wisdom – here and now, even if this happens *w ukryciu* ("in hiding"), that is to say, in a way which people may find unclear and incomprehensible. In other translations, the

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Wujek's translation: *Oto bowiem w nieprawościach jestem poczęty, a w grzechach poczęła mię matka moja* ("Lo, here I am conceived in iniquity, in sin was I conceived of my mother"), and the Psalter of Puławy: *Bo owa we złościach poczęt jeśm i w grzeszech poczęła mie matka moja* ("For here I am conceived among evils, among sins conceived am I of my mother").

Vulgate's mysterious *occulta sapientiae*<sup>11</sup> function as the object of the entreaty – take the Millennium Bible, where the psalmist invokes God's qualities to request a gift: *Oto Ty masz upodobanie w ukrytej prawdzie,/ naucz mnie tajników mądrości* (“For you delight in hidden truth,/ teach me the secrets of wisdom”). In Wujek's sixteenth-century translation, we find a truth-loving God who has long revealed to man the “hidden things of wisdom” (*skryte rzeczy mądrości*); the translations in *Psalterz puławski* and *Psalterz floriański* are similar, the perfect tense additionally emphasised by the archaic form of the auxiliary verb to be (*jeś*): *Owa wiem, prawdę miłował jeś, niepewne i tajemne mądrości twojej zjawil jeś mnie* (“For I know that thou hast loved truth, and hast revealed to me the uncertain and secret things of wisdom.”) Among the old poets, Kochanowski uses the present tense: *O Panie, Ty szczerłość serdeczną miłujesz/ I skarb swej mądrości takim okazujesz* (“O Lord, Thou lovest sincerity of heart/ and revealest the treasure of Thy wisdom to those who have it.”) Among the moderns, Brandstaetter boldly chooses the future tense: *Zaprawdę, upodobałeś sobie prawość utajoną/ I w tajemnicy objawisz mi mądrość*. (“Truly you have found delight with hidden righteousness,/ and will secretly reveal wisdom to me.”) Miłosz's translation does not illuminate any one of God's secret paths leading to the human heart, but the way it rigorously maintains the symmetries of the two central verses strongly brings out the two extremes of human conscience which jointly delimit the space of human choices: the corruption caused by evil and the intuition of truth.

The pleas which follow in this part contain some jarring phonetic and lexical dissonances in Verse 12: *Serce czyste stwórz we mnie, Boże, \* i ducha mocy odnów we wnętrznościach moich* (“Create a clean heart in me, God, and renew the spirit of power in my entrails.”). Most other translations opt for more figurative treatments. In the Millennium Bible, God is asked to renew “in the breast an indomitable spirit,” (*w piersi ducha niezwykłego*) and the breviary version simply asks for a renewed “strength of spirit in me” (*we mnie mocy ducha*). What are the reasons for Miłosz's radical choice of this concrete image? Surely he was looking back at the earliest translations, particularly *Psalterz Puławski: Sierce czyste stwórz we mnie, Boże, i duch prosty wznowi we czrzewiach moich!* (“Create a clean heart in me, O God, and renew a simple spirit in my entrails”). However, the poetic tradition notwithstanding, the word *wnętrzności* (“en-

<sup>11</sup> Cf. the full verse in the Vulgate, *Ecce enim veritatem dilexisti, incerta et occulta sapientiae tuae manifestasti mihi*.

trails”) can hardly be described as a natural poetic choice; phonetically, the passage likewise contains a difficult knot of plosives and fricatives immediately following the words *serce czyste stwórz* (“create a clean heart”), itself a tricky string of phonemes. We are dealing with a translator who was otherwise highly sensitive to the sounds of language, so was this surprising choice intentional? The Hebrew original must have provided some of the inspiration, but from the reader’s point of view it is notable that the passage occurs within a sequence of synonymous pleas for *serce czyste* (“a clean heart”), *ducha mocy* (“a spirit of power”), *ducha świętego* (“the holy spirit”), *radość zbawienia* (“the joy of salvation”) *ducha gorliwości* (“a spirit of zeal.”) In this sense, the phrases uniquely broaden the meditation on God’s presence in man. A spirit of power which permeates a man’s entrails brings to mind health and vitality, but also the powerlessness we feel over our own insides which are necessary for life but unknowable – hidden and, in a sense, diametrically opposed to our sense of identity, which we are reluctant to associate with our physicality. However the Psalms seem to treat our bodies, and their autonomous insides, as the place where God is experienced.

In the concluding verses, the theme of sacrifice comes to the fore (or rather the idea of sacrificial substitution): *Bo nie pragniesz ofiar, abym je składał, \* całopalenia nie żądasz./ Ofiarą moją, Panie, jest duch bolejący, \* sercem bolejącym i skruszonym nie pogardzisz, Boże* (“For you desire no sacrifices from me, you demand no burnt offerings./ A mournful spirit is my sacrifice, O Lord, you shall not despise a mournful and contrite heart.”) Desiring no sacrifice or burnt offering, this is God as we know him from the epistles of Paul; a God who prefers love to relinquishing the body for burning, the bestowing of all one’s goods to feed the poor or the songs of men and of angels. But in most translations this passage also evokes the sacrifice of Isaac, the Old Testament’s greatest trial of mutual trust between God and man. Here is the verse in the Millennium Bible: *Ty się bowiem nie radujesz ofiarą/ i nie chcesz całopaleń, choćbym je dawał* (“For you take no delight in sacrifice/ and want no burnt offerings, were I to offer them.”) Likewise in the breviary version the verse reads: *Ofiarą bowiem Ty się nie radujesz, \*/ a całopalenia, choćbym dał, nie przyjmiesz* (“For you take no delight in sacrifice, \*/ and would not accept a burnt offering were I to offer it.”). This hypothetical supposition (*were I to offer it*) contains the dramatic tension of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac, an offering given but not accepted. Ultimately, the sting of uncertainty is lodged precisely in the expectation that a gracious God will turn down man’s sacrificial offering. The con-

ditional mode, which Miłosz forgoes, also appears in *Psalterz puławski*, where it is additionally emphasised by the inflection of the archaic auxiliary verb *bych*, derived from the aorist: *Bo by był chciał modłę, wzdal bych był owszem; modłami nie będziesz sie kochać.*<sup>12</sup> (“Hadst thou wanted sacrifice, I would have offered it; thou shalt find no delight in offerings.”) This instance of hesitation, missing from Miłosz’s translation, is a stone-shaped hole in the stream.

In religious iconography, figures in prayer are usually depicted with their eyes cast upwards. David is often painted in this manner, although the Second Book of Samuel only says that David “lay all night upon the earth” (2 Sm 12,16, KJV). Artists liked to depict David wearing a crown and a royal cloak, holding a lute or a harp in his hands to vividly express the idea that this greatest of penitent sinners was no stranger to joyous song or dance. But David in prayer, pressing a manuscript scroll to his chest, is the only reason we can be privy to his guilt – because even in the depths of mourning he never forgot that he was a poet.

The rediscovery of the poetry in the Psalms seems to be Miłosz’s greatest achievement as a Bible translator. For all the liturgical distance created by billowing clouds of incense, modern readers instinctively look for a psychological realism to make this unique and ancient testimony of faith accessible to modern sensibilities. By placing equal importance on prosody and semantics, Miłosz in many ways makes this task easier. He reproduces the qualities of Hebrew poetry with painstaking care, in a way which demands a focused effort to recognise and interpret the links and connections between its words, lines and verses. The translation creates an engrossing show which deserves keen attention – like an intricate mediaeval miniature.

**trans. Piotr Szmeczak**

---

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Wujek’s translation: *Albowiem gdybyś był chciał ofiary, wždybych ci ją był dał: lecz w całopalonych ofiarach nie będziesz się kochał* (“For hadst Thou wanted sacrifice, I would have given it unto Thee: but Thou shalt take no delight in burnt offerings.”)

## Bibliography

- Bernacki L. 1939. *Psalterz Florjański* [Saint Florian's Psalter]. Lwów: Ossolineum (reprinted 2002, Łódź: Archidiecezjalne Wydawnictwo Łódzkie).
- Błoński J. 1983. "Zdanie. Przekłady biblijne Czesława Miłosza" [A Sentence. Czesław Miłosz's Biblical Translations]. *Tygodnik Powszechny* 14.
- Cybulski M. 2002. „*Psalterz floriański* a inne staropolskie przekłady *Psalterza*” [The Florianski Psalter and Rother Pold Poland's translations of the Psalter]. *Psalterz Florjański*. 1939. Ed. L. Bernacki. Lwów: Ossolineum (reprinted 2002, Łódź: Archidiecezjalne Wydawnictwo Łódzkie), 13–51.
- Johnson P. 1987. *A History of the Jews*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Liturgia Godzin* [The Liturgy of the Hours]. Vol. I–IV. 1984. Poznań: Pallotinum.
- Księga psalmów* [Book of Psalms]. 1982 [1979]. Transl. Cz. Miłosz. Paris: Éditions du Dialogue.
- Miłosz Cz. 1998. *Ogród nauk* [The Garden of Arts]. Krakow: Znak.
- 1997. *Piesek przydrożny* [The Roadside Dog]. Krakow: Znak.
- 2000. *Wypisy z ksiąg użytecznych* [A Book of Luminous Things]. Krakow: Znak.
- Pismo Święte Starego i Nowego Testamentu* [The Millennium Bible, 3rd editio]. 1980. Poznań: Pallotinum.
- Psalterz* [The Psalter]. 2003. Trans. R. Brandstaetter. Poznań: Pallotinum.
- "*Psalterz Dawidów*." 1969 [1579]. Trans. J. Kochanowski. J. Kochanowski. *Dzieła polskie*. Vol. 1. Warsaw: PIW, 321–539.
- Psalterz Dawidów w przekładzie ks. Jakuba Wujka z 1594 roku* [The Psalm of King David in Jakub Wujek's 1594 Translation]. 1993. Ed. J. Frankowski. Warsaw: PAX.
- Psalterz Puławski* [The Puławy Psalter]. In: *Chrestomatia Staropolska* [Old Poland's Chrestomatia]. Eds. W. Wydra, W.R. Rzepka. 2004. Wrocław: Ossolineum. 68–75.
- Sadzik J. 1982. "O Psalmach" [On Psalms]. *Księga psalmów* [Book of Psalms]. 1982 [1979]. Trans. Cz. Miłosz. Paris: Éditions du Dialogue. 9–42.
- Wydra W. and W.R. Rzepka eds. 2004 [1984]. *Chrestomatia Staropolska* [Old Poland's Chrestomatia]. Wrocław: Ossolineum.