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HOW MUCH CAN ONE SAY? CONFESSIONAL POETRY AND CONFESSIONALISM OF POETRY

Abstract: This essay sets out to examine Miłosz's attitude towards confessional poetry, or rather, to examine his stance on confessionalism as a seemingly inseparable element of any poetic utterance. By means of such terms as decorum, referentiality of poetic language and its usefulness, I try to show why Miłosz preferred to stay away from overtly confessional modes of poetic utterance, which draw too heavily on the poet's own experiences and may result in blurring the distinction between biography and literature. One reason why the poet so intensely disliked excessive confessionalism is that its main purpose is to describe the emotions of the speaker, whereas he felt that the main task of poetry is to celebrate the dazzling beauty of the outside world, whose existence transcends and surpasses the insignificantly small inner world of a troubled psyche. Last but not least, the notion of the usefulness of poetry, in his understanding of the term, is that it makes it possible for poems written in diverse countries and epochs to intensify the contemporary reader's sense of belonging to the great family of the human race.

Key words: Miłosz, poetry, confessional, decorum, referentiality

The question we have posed can be understood as prompting a reconsideration of the inadequacy and insufficiency of language. The previous century saw a number of philosophical treatises grappling with this issue. The issue also emerges quite often in modern poetry, either in the form of metapoetic reflection on the substance of poetry itself or as a hidden source of tension within the text. Miłosz's views on the matter were ambivalent and often fluctuated, instead of evolving into a homogeneous position. On the one hand, he believes in a certain soteriological potential of language, as evidenced by the famous lines from the poem "Reading the Japanese Poet Issa": "What is pronounced strengthens itself./ What is not pronounced

tends to nonexistence" (Miłosz 2001: 350). An even more elevated expression of his faith is found in the equally famous line from the poem "Dedication": "What is poetry which does not save/ Nations or people?" (Miłosz 1996: 97). On the other hand, the poet is often beset by doubt as to whether poetry is capable of saving anyone or anything, and by a very modern uncertainty as to whether poetry can faithfully represent the world through the imperfect medium of language:

> To express. Nothing can be expressed.
> Fire under a stove lid. Anastasia is making pancakes.
> December. Before dawn. In a village near Jazuny.
> (Miłosz 2006: 2581)

Seventy years after the nigh surrealist profusion of images in *Three Winters*, the poet comes to the conclusion that only the bald naming of things can somehow salvage them.

Consequently, the question formulated in the title of this essay ought to be understood as an effort to delineate what a poem can decently say and reveal; to locate the border beyond which lies the unspeakable, where even poetry should not venture.

I am interested here not only in Confessional Poetry understood as a movement in the history of American literature, which gained particular popularity in the 1960s, and whose most famous representatives were Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, but also as a certain mode of perceiving poetry which accentuates spontaneous or quasi-spontaneous sincerity and freely uses biographical material from the author's own life, thus blurring the distinction between the poet and the persona who speaks in the poem, and does not shy away from broaching controversial and taboo subjects.[1] It is important to distinguish between

[1] Miłosz's remarks concerning the Confessional Poets are for the most part anecdotal and incidental; at the same time, it is worth quoting an excerpt from his letter of 1967 to Zbigniew Herbert: "I had a blazing row (...) with Robert Lowell and the poet Creeley (...), yelling at them in public and telling them I don't give a flying fuck about their poetry, and that I did not free myself from Polish parochialism only to be sucked into their shitty opinions" (Franaszek 2011: 645; trans. P.M.). In *The Year of the Hunter*, we find the following controversial entry of August 12, 1987: "In California at the end of the century, I, with my knowledge of the hells of Europe, like Mr. Sammler from Saul Bellow's novel. Also with a certain scepticism toward the privilege that American poets appropriate for themselves, the privilege of being certified madmen. Alcoholism, drugs, stays in psychiatric hospitals, suicide – these are supposed to be signs of exceptionally talented individuals. America has been thrusting them into this since the time of Edgar Allan Poe. This is possible, but it is also pos-

the historical phenomenon of Confessionalism and confessionalism understood as an inherent – though most certainly gradable – trait of any poetic utterance.

The following considerations will be based on three issues: *decorum*, the referentiality of language and the usefulness of poetry.

Miłosz's entire *oeuvre* demonstrates how strongly he was attached to the classical notion of *decorum*, though he also recognised the vast importance of what one might call existential *decorum*, or simple decency. The notion of *decorum* has always played an important role in academic literary discourse, but for Miłosz the decision of whether or not to publish a poem often hinged on factors which had little or nothing to do with literature. This is how he describes misgivings of this nature in *The Year of the Hunter*:

> No matter how often my pen tempts me, I hesitate to describe our life in Brie and Montgeron. Because if I were to do it absolutely honestly and openly, I would reveal virtually everything that I know, or at least think, about myself. I am restrained by my concern for the other people who are involved in this. Janka above all, who can no longer correct anything, so that only my version would be preserved (Miłosz 1995: 261).

Apparently, Robert Lowell was blissfully oblivious to such dilemmas when he wove into his poems excerpts from letters from his wife, Elizabeth Hardwick, which caused outrage both among his friends and ordinary readers of poetry.

While confessional poets (both the founders of the movement and the innumerable army of epigones) riddle the text with many biographical hints enabling the reader to trace the poem back to the life of its author, in

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sible that the Romantic myth that identifies greatness with deviance received new stimulus in the shape of the permissive society and now engenders real, not imagined, results. Whenever Robert Lowell landed in a clinic I couldn't help thinking that if someone would only give him fifteen lashes with a belt on his bare behind, he'd recover immediately. I admit, that was only envy speaking through me. If I cannot indulge myself, why should he be free to indulge himself?" (Miłosz 1995:16–17). Another excerpt from the same book: "Later on, I saw Lowell during his visits to Berkeley. My aversion may have been provoked by his fame during the sixties when the whole pacifist youth movement considered him our great progressive; he confirmed their faith that all people, especially poets, think identically, because only swine think differently (…) Add to this Lowell's divorces, his stays in psychiatric clinics, his interest in European (museum) culture, and we have a typical chronology of a life – too typical for my taste – in the service of a commonplace milieu" (Miłosz 1995: 219–220).

Miłosz's case such traces are blurred and ambiguous.[2] When he does resolve to smuggle certain biographical elements into his verse, he is careful to disguise and camouflage them, as we can see in his debut proper, *Three Winters*. Interviewed by Renata Gorczyńska, Miłosz admits that one of the poems in that volume, "Statue of a Couple," is very personal, but the text itself hardly discloses any of the biographical circumstances which lay at its inception, only its semantic density and catastrophic imagery imply that it was written under enormous pressure.[3]

This is why Miłosz was against the kind of poetry which reveals too much, venturing into the realm of taboo and making immoderate use of the author's own biography. It is also why he disliked the novel as a genre, because it discloses too much biographical detail without sufficient transmutation thereof, as poetry does. He admits in the same interview:

> Poetry is the distillation of form, but it's also the dream of biting off as much meat, reality, as possible. To my mind, a novel's only proper task is to describe how things really were. But that can't be done. It would make me blush for shame (Miłosz 1987: 161).[4]

About confessional literature in its broad understanding, he has the following to say: "I don't understand that mentality, that total exhibitionism. Is the guy saying that absolutely nothing is sacred to him?" (Miłosz 1987: 171)[5]

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[2] In Andrzej Franaszek's words: "those traces are as scarce as bird footprints scattered in the snow or frost patterns on glass" (Franaszek 2012: 207; trans. P.M.).

[3] Even in a very dramatic and bitter poem "How Could I?," written towards the very end of his life, Miłosz does not venture into the autobiographical: "How could I/ How could I/ do such things/ living in this hideous world/ subject to its laws/ toying with its laws./ I need God, so that He may forgive me/ I need a God of mercy" (Miłosz 2006: 297). One is intrigued by the semantically spacious but elusive phrase "such things."

[4] In another fragment of the same interview, Miłosz says the following: "The very idea of poetry presupposes immense transformation. In poetry, form is profoundly of the essence, utterly apart from meter, rhyme, or whatever other stylistic approach is taken. The very essence of the act is to distill the substance of life" (1987: 171).

[5] In the poem "To Robert Lowell," written at an advanced age, we find the tone of reconciliation which is characteristic of this phase of his poetry – Miłosz is trying to find and focus on what brings him closer to the poets whose paths were very different from his own. Even the iconoclastic Allan Ginsberg and the "inhuman" Robinson Jeffers are embraced in this gesture of reconciliation. The aforementioned envy was probably that felt by someone who had precious little choice in life, and whom History had forced to be a witness of the era, even though Miłosz himself disliked the term; Lowell had the comfort of being a witness to and meticulous chronicler of nothing more than the insane fluctuations of his psyche.

On reading "Job," the most moving chapter in Franaszek's biography of Miłosz, we can see that, much as the poet is tempted to succumb to despair, which may yield some backwards comfort, he also asks for fortitude, without directly showing his anguish in the poetry written at the time. The reader of these dark poems can only try to guess what tormenting experiences are behind them, but he will not learn anything about Miłosz's personal life or about the illnesses plaguing his family, as if even the poems written on the verge of despair ought to observe the rules of *decorum*.

Whether or not it is at all possible to write poetry that does not reveal anything about the author's life is thus answered by Miłosz: "That's an important question. I don't know to what degree... I have always had tremendous misgivings about revealing myself" (Miłosz 1987: 122). He has the following to say about his early poem "Incarnation": "I was embarrassed, because the author and the persona in this poem are somehow shamelessly close; there is too little distance from the persona" (Miłosz 1987: 120). Even the seemingly "safe" genre of the dramatic monologue, whose distinguishing feature is the unrelatedness of its author and the speaker, is by no means hermetic; after all, it is significant that one of its inventors, Robert Browning, employs the figure of Caliban to investigate some disturbing questions of a theological and philosophical nature which confronted his fellow Victorians. The text of "Prufrock" certainly provides some hints about the young T.S. Eliot, while the dramatic monologue of the three Magi says quite a lot about the religiousness of his mature years.[6] In the same way, the persona of Adrian Zieliński in "Songs of Adrian Zieliński" created by Miłosz in the *Rescue* collection speaks volumes about the young poet.

We might approach the problem from a different angle; let us start with a quote from "A Magic Mountain": "With a flick of the wrist I fashioned an invisible rope,/ And climbed it and it held me" (Miłosz 1996: 245). In *Visions from San Francisco Bay* he adds:

[6] In Franaszek's commentary: "The experience of translating the polyphonic poetry of T.S. Eliot and Shakespeare, reading Robert Browning and Edgar Lee Masters, but also observing Tiger's self-creation, and his own theatrical and thespian proclivities make it possible for Miłosz to introduce a persona or a speaker into his poetry whose relation to the author is complicated on many levels, ranging from intimacy to utter remoteness. The force of a persona lies in the fact that it can accommodate many characters at the same time, who may be totally different from us, while dispensing with any commentary from the author himself" (2011: 351; trans. P.M.).

> Only God can save me, because in ascending to him I rise above myself, and my true essence is not in me but above me. Like a spider I am climbing a thread, and that thread, beyond any doubt mine alone, is fastened at the point I came from and at the point where a Thou resides addressing me as Thou (Miłosz 1983: 74).

These "vertical ambitions" of the poet find their culmination in "Old Age," written in 2003. Its second stanza contains the following lines:

> There's no bottom to worse.
> Time for pious readings.
> If I could latch on to some sacred personage,
> for instance the blessed Kunigunde,
> and hang suspended like a flake above the pit.
> She in turn clutches the robes of St. Francis
> and thus joined into a garland, we soar.
> (Miłosz 2006: 321)

Miłosz is a poet of nearly ecstatic immersion in the world, but this horizontal perspective is but a prelude to the vertical one, where detailed – and not infrequently lyrical – description of reality gives way to considerations of a theological and philosophical nature. One obvious consequence of those vertical ambitions is upward movement, or at least an attempt to climb, towards the sky, even when, in its more desperate forms, it strikes one as reminiscent of Baron Munchausen's tragicomic method of pulling himself up, as evidenced in the above-quoted poem. Confessional poetry, by contrast, is usually characterised by circular movement, with its never-ending focus on personal difficulties, without trying to break out of the vicious circle of one's own psyche. While Miłosz tries to find consolation through seeing his fate as part of the fate of all humanity, and seeks solace in a metaphysically conceived imagination, the despair of confessional poets remains sealed in solipsistic isolation.

As far as the problem of the referentiality of language is concerned, Miłosz's position on this issue seems to be delineated by two radically different views. On the one hand, he disapproves of "pure poetry," which he sometimes dismisses as *écriture*, i.e. mere scribbling. He disapproves of it because he finds it aridly self-sufficient and self-referential. In the first section of "From the Rising of the Sun," we find lines denouncing "Odious rhythmic speech/ Which grooms itself and, of its own accord, moves on" (Miłosz 2001: 278). Miłosz does not value such poetry since his ideal is

poetic language which has not banished reality, i.e. language whose ambition is to describe the world, and perhaps save it in doing so.[7]

Consequently, it is somewhat paradoxical that the other negative point of reference is confessional poetry, even though it restores linguistic referentiality: its language is no longer barren in its narcissistic self-referentiality, instead it points towards an external reality. Miłosz, however, cannot think highly of such poetry, as it does not try to describe the world and – as he notes in the poem "Blacksmith Shop" – "to glorify things just because they are" (Miłosz 1996: 349). On the contrary, since it stems from an individual – and frequently traumatic – experience, it chooses to focus on this, and remains enclosed therein. As a result, rather than reaching out towards external reality, language which has been liberated from the tyranny of pure poetry is directed inwards, and falls into a different kind of trap. The world does not become an object of description but is reduced to an amorphous catalogue which supplies the poet with raw metaphorical material. Everything extraneous to the self is merely a random collection of things with no intrinsic value, and as such, deserves no mention in a poem; it may at best have secondary value as mere material which can subsequently be transformed by the poet into descriptions of the speaker's emotions. This is why Sylvia Plath's poems contain references to the nightmarish reality of the concentration camps; their main task is to stress the suffering of the speaker herself, rather than to empathise with the prisoners and victims; such empathy can be found not only in Miłosz but also W.H. Auden and Zbigniew Herbert. Lowell, Plath and Sexton are more interested in self-therapy through poetry than trying to understand what Herbert describes as "the fear of Neanderthals." Miłosz never limits his verse to self-therapy, but always tries to bind his anguish with that of other people, whom he often describes as the family of humanity. Even as a young poet, he wrote in "Slow River" about an invisible harness which runs from his hands to every living thing, while several years later in "Two in Rome" this gesture is extended to embrace both the living and the dead. Such almost Buddhist compassion for everything that is born, suffers and dies is one of the defining features of Miłosz's entire opus. His poetry is energised by a constant

[7] One may note in passing that, in order to describe reality, one has to believe in its objective, pre-verbal and trans-verbal existence. Because Miłosz is confident that reality exists objectively, he is violently opposed to post-structuralism and deconstruction, that is, philosophies which – in Derrida's famous maxim – insist that *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*. In one of his most violent and irate poems Miłosz writes with contempt about the lecture of a French structuralist.

tension between the subjectively individual and the interpersonally universal. The poet tries to see his life as part of the shared fate of all humankind, regardless of whether it concerns the fate of an exile, prompting him to speak about Dante, Ovid and poets from Eastern Europe, or the metaphysical fate of all humanity, whereby he may write about original sin, the expulsion from the Garden of Eden and our universal hope of returning there. That is why he is so attached to the idea of *apocatastasis* with its message of universal salvation. "In a Parish" is a picture of a restored world in which the *apocatastasis* has already occurred. It abounds in familiar names, as if the suspiciously abstract term borrowed from Greek theology needed to be made more specific by summoning the dead parishioners by their names:

> Then we go down into the earth, my fellow parishioners.
> With the hope that the trumpet of judgment will call us by our names
> Instead of eternity, greenness and the movement of clouds.
> They rise then, thousands of Sophias, Michaels, Matthews, Marias, Agathas, Bartholomews.
> So that at last they know why
> And for what reason?
>
> (Miłosz 2001: 74)

Since the Buddhist dimension of Miłosz's poetry has already been mentioned, it seems we ought to bring up the notion of *dukkha*, which is semantically very comprehensive and spans a number of psychological states ranging from acute suffering, disillusionment and embitterment to a vague feeling of discontent with the way things are. Importantly, Buddhists believe that this is an experience shared by all humanity and every single individual. Cognizant of the fact that we are all members of the large family of the human race, Miłosz points out that each of us is tormented by some form of *dukkha*, no matter how hard we try to conceal this fact. This is the subject of "An Old Man Watches TV," which draws on the traumatic experience of watching Polish TV:

> Maybe after all you could cry
> a little bit,
> instead of grinning for the audience
> and doing backflips.
>
> Just a little reflection
> might be a propos,
> Though I'm old and white-bearded,

I'm not alone to think so.

Each of you makes faces
behind which you hide,
so no one guesses the lament
we carry inside.
(Miłosz 2006: 320)

Confessional poets, by contrast, tend to regard others as either a Sartrean source of misery or as a kind of mirror in which the anguished poet can see himself (or herself). Their poetry is devoid of any attempt to break through the carapace of individual experience so as to perceive it as emblematic of the common experience of all humanity. In a way, their writing is anti-Shakespearean in that the world is no longer a stage where all people are players who have their parts; instead, the world is reduced to a theatrical space where the suffering poet is acting out the monodrama of his (or her) own existence. Such an attitude is visible in Sylvia Plath's famous "Lady Lazarus," in which the American poetess assumes the role of a guide-cum-performer giving a detailed account of her suicide attempts. Such poetry severs all links with the large family of Shakespearean *theatrum mundi*, whom fate forces to act out the spectacle of the seven ages of man; instead, it operates on the binary oppositions of the poet-actor juxtaposed with the "they" of reader-audience.

The wonderful *Book of Luminous Things* anthology, compiled and edited by Miłosz, raises an important question concerning the usefulness of literature. It is significant that this anthology does not contain any poems by confessional poets, with the sole exception of Theodore Roethke, who, however, was only loosely associated with the movement. In the introduction Miłosz says the following:

> My intention is not so much to defend poetry in general, but, rather, to remind readers that for some very good reasons it may be of importance today. These reasons have to do with our troubles in the present phase of our civilization (1998: xvi).

In other words, useful books are those which give us hope, enhancing our sense of belonging to the large family of humanity.[8] Consequently,

[8] In her book on Miłosz's poetry, Joanna Zach employs the term "edifying literature;" literature can be edifying not only in the sense of bringing comfort and solace, but also because it helps us to erect the edifice of language in which man can dwell. Marian Stala

according to Miłosz, literature as understood and written by Lowell – as well as Beckett and Larkin – is useless, since it shamelessly exposes the wretchedness and misery of existence without bringing any relief. On the contrary, it focuses on this wretchedness, thus bringing the reader to the very brink of despair.[9] Such a view of poetry is by no means new to Miłosz, given that in the 1968 poem "Ars Poetica?" he wrote the following:

> There was a time when only wise books were read,
> Helping us to bear our pain and misery.
> This, after all, is not quite the same
> As leafing through a thousand works fresh from psychiatric clinic.
> (Miłosz 2001: 240)

Confessional poetry, by contrast, abounds in works which attempt self-therapy – these quite often proved ineffectual, as many of the most eminent Confessional Poets died by their own hand. Thus writing a poem becomes an equivalent of or an ersatz psychotherapy session. Such poems are useful only for their authors, they lack interpersonal or objective usefulness in the way Miłosz understood it. He always hesitated when it came to publishing poems written for purely self-therapeutic purposes, deciding never to publish "Song in Praise of My Epoch" precisely for this reason. In *The Year of the Hunter,* the seventy-seven-year-old gives thanks for his passion and his

makes the following remark: "Useful poetry is the poetry of the visible, it is the word which discloses and compels one to see" (Stala 2011: 230; trans. P.M.).

[9] In *The Land of Ulro* Miłosz says that Beckett comes to him only to needle him that he is a hunchback, while Miłosz, in part through poetry, tries to free himself from the awareness of that affliction; the much-hated Philip Larkin is reminded that death is no theme for poetry. Paradoxically enough, such dark and lugubrious verse may also have therapeutic potential for some readers (we all know individuals who reach for Beckett when they need a boost of energy). Sylvia Plath's most famous poem speaks about, and is founded in, a feeling of hatred for her father, who later is transformed into her husband. Such poetry cannot meet with Miłosz's approval, but we know from poetry websites and chat rooms that it has had a therapeutic or even cathartic effect on many readers. The moment a poem is published, the poet surrenders all control over it, since it becomes impossible for him or her to affect the range of possible readings or to predict what emotional consequences it may have for those who read it. As a matter of fact, any poem can function as an analgesic for the reader, regardless of its author's intentions.

Marian Stala poses the following question in his commentary to "In Despair": "The poem indicates that the problem the poet faces is less whether or not to experience despair than whether one should reveal or hide it. Should one, in the name of courage, stifle and suppress it or, on the contrary, express it directly and pull others into the world of one's profoundly negative experiences in the process?" (Stala 2011: 246; trans. P.M.).

still vital gift of poetry, while confessing that most probably he will never publish many of the poems written in the previous year since they were written as self-therapy and that, in his opinion, such poetry is futile. On the other hand, it can be difficult to resist the temptation of suspecting that Miłosz's silence on certain matters may have had a less noble motivation, as we can see from a letter Jerzy Giedroyc wrote to Stanisław Vincenz: "If he only plucked up the courage to reveal all his cowardice and helplessness, he might perhaps feel better" (Franaszek 2011: 539; trans. P.M.).

Summing up, one could say that Miłosz rejects a view of humanity emerging from excessively confessional poetry which implies that one can reach certain truths about man by wallowing in the base, the shocking and the neurotic, while literature itself is reduced to a tool which proves handy only if it enables the poet to indulge in self-pity and to flaunt his (or her) misery to the world. Miłosz's indignation is aroused by poetry founded on flagrantly exhibitionist honesty, while at the same time flouting the concept of *decorum* and the rules of artistic craftsmanship.[10] One might quote another poem, written in Miłosz's old age, which clearly delineates the boundaries beyond which one should not venture, as speaking about certain topics may bring more harm than good:

Do not reveal what is forbidden. Keep the secret.
Since what is disclosed does people harm.
It's like in our childhood, that room that's haunted
And whose door we mustn't open.
And what would I have found there in that room?
Something different then, something different now,
Now that I am old and have been describing for so long,
What the eyes can see.
Until I learned that it is best
To keep quiet.

(Miłosz 2006: 277)

trans. Przemysław Michalski

[10] This remark concerns the epigones of Lowell and Plath rather than the founders of the movement.

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