“FOR HERE HAVE WE NO CONTINUING CITY, BUT WE SEEK ONE TO COME.” FRIENDS UNITED BY EXILE: ON THE CORRESPONDENCE OF CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ AND THOMAS MERTON.

Abstract: This article discusses the decade-long correspondence of Czeslaw Miłosz and Thomas Merton, published first in a Polish translation in 1991, and only later, in 1997, in the original English. Though Merton offered to write in French, a language that Miłosz at the time knew much better than English, Miłosz chose to use the latter. The article concentrates on Miłosz’s side of the correspondence, comparing the impression of struggle and incomplete command that his letters evoke in the original version with the linguistic elegance and control implied by the Polish translation. The article suggests that Miłosz’s slightly foreign English is a kind of reflection of the theme implied by the English title of the correspondence, Striving Towards Being. Moreover, the article argues that writing in English, despite the constraints that it imposed, enabled the Polish poet to discover a childlike freedom of expression and to meet his “correspondent,” a fellow-sufferer from spiritual homelessness, in sympathetic understanding, though the external experience of the two was very different. Paradoxically, each partner, in his search for someone who “spoke the same language,” found what he sought in a person who, in the literal sense, did not.

Keywords: Miłosz-Merton correspondence, exile, spiritual homelessness, writing in a foreign language, Miłosz’s English

A late selection of Miłosz’s writings entitled O podróżach w czasie (On Travels in Time), contains a short essay on Thomas Merton, which first appeared in the Polish Catholic weekly Tygodnik Powszechny in 2002. Although this essay is only incidental to the present discussion, it nevertheless makes a good starting point for the reflections that follow on a cor-
respondence between the Polish poet and the American monk conducted forty years earlier. The title of the essay is simple and highly personal: “Przyjaciel” (Friend).¹ Unlike other essays in the volume that are devoted to friends and acquaintances of the author, this one makes no immediate announcement as to who is to be its subject, naming this person simply Friend, and by so doing, suggesting a relationship that is unique, of the kind that a title such as “Mother” or “Wife” would suggest.

As Milosz himself acknowledges, the bond of friendship that he shared with Merton was extraordinary in many ways, not least in that it was formed and largely developed by means of letters. In the conclusion to this short essay, Milosz pays a remarkable tribute to his now long dead but very dear personal friend, claiming without hesitation or reservation that Merton was one of only a few “bright figures” of the twentieth century, “whose creative minds, perhaps, have weighed down the scale on the side of good rather than evil” (2004: 156). In paying honour to the memory of the American monk, Milosz at the same time recalls the correspondence that he conducted with him over one whole decade in the mid-twentieth century, a correspondence whose original remained in manuscript form until nearly thirty years after Merton’s death. Now, in hindsight, Milosz describes this exchange of letters as representing “an interesting encounter between an American and a European mind;” and he adds: “for after all, Merton was very American, while I felt myself to be European” (2004: 155).

Although there might be some disagreement as to whether Merton was really so “very American,” this cross-cultural encounter is an undoubtedly important motif of the correspondence. It was initiated by an American, Thomas Merton, who was inspired by his reading of The Captive Mind to write to its author, a European so far unknown to him, who was living at that time in Paris. Milosz himself speaks frequently of the difficulties with which he had to struggle, first in making up his mind whether to return to the United States in the nineteen sixties, and then in adapting for good to the world of America. At times, Milosz argues fiercely against Merton’s way of thinking. Here, however, I would like to draw attention to a different aspect of these letters, as it seems to me even more striking than the encounter between minds shaped by different cultures, fascinating though that is, namely the astonishing affinity between the correspondents on the

¹ This and all subsequent translations from Polish texts, unless otherwise indicated, are those of the author, Jean Ward. See also Milosz’s reference to his friend Merton in Abecadło Milosza [Milosz’s ABC] (Milosz 1997: 171).
spiritual-intellectual-emotional plane. Not, of course, that the matters discussed in the correspondence are of an exclusively intimate or spiritual nature; the letters of both authors reveal clearly how deeply both were involved with the life and problems of the day. Nevertheless, it seems that the editor of the correspondence in its English original, who chose as the book’s title a phrase from one of Miłosz’s letters, Striving Towards Being, was right to emphasise above all the spiritual dimension of this meeting of minds. “All is futility except our striving towards Being,” wrote Miłosz (Merton, Miłosz 1997: 133); and it is noteworthy that the word Being is capitalised. The pages of this book have preserved not merely an exchange of thoughts and opinions, of reflections on an impressive and unusual variety of reading, but they have also recorded shared feelings, spiritual experiences, inner fears and conflicts. For today’s reader, “listening in,” as it were, to the conversation between Miłosz and Merton, what emerges from this exchange is an unexpected glimpse of deeply personal realms in the lives of each of the two participants. Sometimes, indeed, readers might wonder if they had not been placed in a position rather uncomfortably close to an occupied confessional.

Although the question of the origins of the two writers and of the differences between them is an important one for present-day readers of this correspondence, what is likely to occur to them before anything else is a rather sad reflection. For it seems that the days when such a book, the extraordinary record of dialogue and of two men’s inner struggles and conflicts, could be published have quietly, but quickly and irrevocably, slipped into the past. In our world of electronic communication, this is a loss that can never be sufficiently mourned. Grandiose though it might sound, one is tempted to reflect, recalling the title of these considerations, that humanity has largely been exiled – or perhaps better, has exiled itself – from a realm of life that was once a haven for the soul, where it could rest calm and safe and open itself frankly to others.

It was in this now largely vanished realm of letter-writing that in the 1960s, an American Trappist monk and a Polish poet estranged from his homeland found refuge from the sense of exile that dominated their experience. Miłosz shows himself in this correspondence to be a thinker of formidable intellectual powers, who pondered – most often critically – a variety of aspects of American culture as he was coming to know it in these years. More significantly, he reveals above all the extent of his personal vulnerability, his uncertainties and doubts, his dissatisfaction with himself and his


