Abstract: During his life in America Czesław Miłosz met many people but few of them were more important than a man whom he saw only twice – Thomas Merton. Miłosz and Merton corresponded regularly for almost ten years (1959–1960) and their letters, published in Polish and English, show two great minds involved in a deep and sincere dialogue, revealing their most intimate thoughts as well as fears and hopes. Close to each other, they nevertheless remained independent in their thinking. This article presents their exchanges on political issues such as the Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement or communist Russia. It also describes how each of them perceived the changes in the Catholic Church initiated by the Second Vatican Council. Interesting parallels in their biographies are also mentioned.

Keywords: Czesław Miłosz, Thomas Merton, 1960s, Second Vatican Council

The years Miłosz spent in America were marked by friendships that touched his life. Among his close friends was Thomas Merton, a Catholic monk, writer, poet, spiritual authority of many Catholics, great supporter of the Civil Rights Movement and anti-war movement in the 1960s. Their friendship was rather peculiar – they met only twice, and for ten years (1959–1968) they only exchanged letters. Their correspondence was published both in English and Polish (Merton, Miłosz 1991; Merton, Miłosz 1997).¹ Today their relationship is mainly perceived through Miłosz’s eyes, because the Polish poet lived longer and had a chance to write about his life in retrospect. He devoted two separate texts to Thomas Merton (1986: 184–187; 2004: 154–157).

The Miłosz-Merton correspondence has already been researched and led to surprising conclusions. For example, Szymik, a member of the Pol-

¹ I wish to express my gratitude to Agnieszka Kosińska, Czesław Miłosz’s secretary, for the possibility of consulting the English edition of Miłosz-Merton correspondence [A.G.].
ish Catholic clergy, in his monograph on the theological aspects of Miłosz’s poetry ascribes Merton the role of a clerical authority who sees Miłosz as a stubborn yet ultimately complying “parishioner.” Szymik argues that Merton was “a guide in a cassock” offering the Polish poet “the Christological key as a solution to the problem of evil and suffering that obsessed Miłosz” (Szymik 1996: 73; trans. A.G.). Other authors are less radical in their opinions. For instance, Contino discovers in Merton’s letters seeds that bore fruit much later in Second Space (2011).

This paper takes yet another approach presenting the Miłosz-Merton correspondence as an exchange of opinions on the political, social and religious turmoil of the 1960s. It focuses on such issues as the Cold War, the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement and the Second Vatican Council. It traces disagreements and mutual influences that found their way into Miłosz’s and Merton’s thinking as well as writing.

Miłosz and Merton: similarities and differences

Quite a few similarities can be traced in the authors’ biographies, backgrounds and literary interests. First of all, Miłosz, born in 1911, was merely four years older than Merton. This means that both were affected by the same zeitgeist: the end of the Great War, the inter-war period, the Second World War. Miłosz, in spite of living in America for more than three decades, always regarded himself as a European. Merton is generally perceived as an American, yet we should bear in mind that he was born in France, spent his childhood there and attended secondary school in England, where he studied one year in Cambridge. Although he identified himself with America later in life, he did have a very strong experience of Europe. This experience must have been negative, as Merton wrote in his autobiography:

it seemed to me that there was some kind of subtle poison in Europe, something that corrupted me, something the very thought and scent of which sickened me (...). The Europe I finally left for good in the late November 1934 was a sad and unquiet continent, full of forebodings (1999: 139, 141).

These statements sound catastrophic, reminiscent of the climate of Miłosz’s poetry at that time: A Poem on Frozen Time (1934) or Three Winters (1936).
Both Milosz and Merton visited Germany and witnessed early Nazism. Milosz thus remembered the ominous aura of Nazi ideology during his stay in Paris in 1934:

Günther, a young Nazi, used to recite his poems to me. They celebrated the age of chivalry, sacrifices and blood and they had the sound of clanking swords (...). But the day of the soccer match between France and Germany – it took place just after annexation of the Saar – I came home certain. German tourists, transported to the game by buses, filled one-third of the grandstands. Was this sport or disguised warfare? The disciplined yells and lifting of banners with the swastika – the aura in itself was so obvious, it would have been hard to remain indifferent (2002: 177, 179).

Merton’s encounter with Nazis took place even earlier:

One Sunday morning in the spring of 1932 I was hiking through the Rhine Valley. With a pack on my back I was wandering down a quiet country road among flowering apple orchards, near Koblenz. Suddenly a car appeared and came down the road very fast. Almost before I had taken full notice of it, I realized it was coming straight at me and instinctively jumped into the ditch. The car passed in a cloud of leaflets and from the ditch I glimpsed its occupants, six or seven youths screaming and shaking their fists. They were Nazis and it was election day. I was being invited to vote for Hitler, who was not yet in power. These were future officers in the SS (1975a: iii).

In their twenties both Milosz and Merton reached pivotal decisions that seemed irrational to them and to their friends at the time. However, when Milosz as an old man looked back at that moment, he claimed that “foolishness is necessary in all our designs, so that they are realized, awkwardly and incompletely” (1995: 9). Merton, aged twenty, having wasted one year at Clare College, Cambridge, womanizing and drinking, abandons his plans to become a diplomat, leaves the university, and goes to America (1999: 141–144). Milosz, aged twenty-three, breaks with Jadwiga Waszkiewicz, possibly rejecting the promising stable future of a respectable lawyer in Vilnius, which could offer him free time to be a poet (Franaszek 2011: 180). Moreover, in their twenties both of them might have unintentionally become fathers, a possibility not ruled out by their biographers (Franaszek 2011: 182; Merton 1999: xii).

As young men both see themselves as “leftists,” fascinated with social justice and class emancipation: Milosz rejects the chauvinistic concepts and actions of the Polish National Democrats; Merton joins the Young
Bibliography

Renascence 63, 177–187.


Ward, J. 2013. “‘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.” *Przekładaniec 25–English Version*, 177–188.