WHITMAN AND MIŁOSZ’S AMERICA

Abstract: This paper investigates the ambiguous process of Czesław Miłosz’s integration into America (both its nature and culture) in the context of his literary commitments and “private obligations” to American poetry. It was a long and painful process, a constant struggle with the state of exile, feelings of homelessness and uprootedness that finally showed the poet the “new identity” of the modern man, bound to recognise his unstable, tenuous position in space and time. According to Miłosz, America was a testing ground for all mankind, and the very core of American literature had always been the question: “Who am I?” Thus, Miłosz’s serious involvement in American history and culture gave him a new perspective on global civilisation; it helped him to recreate his own identity and to strike a balance between homelessness and belonging.

Key words: exile, the lyrical “I” and the “I” of dithyramb, finding a home in homelessness

America and Exile

When Miłosz was departing for America, which was to become his new place of residence, Tomasz Merton wrote: “I am sure you are on the threshold of a new development that is very important, and I am equally sure that it is better for you to be here than in France right now, though it may not be apparent just why (Merton, Miłosz 1997: 96). By 1960 Miłosz had been working in the diplomatic service in New York and Washington for five years and had been an emigrant for ten. This time he expected a great confrontation, and not only in the personal sense; as a writer endowed with particular insight into history he was to confront a society he deemed thoroughly “anti-Heraclitean.” Ten years earlier he had simply fled from America, fearing an aimless life and intellectual listlessness. Back then, he
had found nothing there to dedicate himself to. Now, he sought to establish a clear goal, to anchor himself in the society, without exposing the wealth inside him to impoverishment. Merton understood him well, as he himself incessantly sought a balance between contemplation and devotion.

Total deracination, uprootedness, is contrary to our nature, and the human plant once plucked from the ground tries to sink roots into the ground onto which it was thrown. This happens because we are physical beings; that is, we occupy space, and the space we occupy, bounded by the surface of our skin, cannot be located in a “nowhere” (Miłosz 1983: 203–204).

Miłosz’s letters to Merton provide us with a clue to his complex situation. On the one hand, America is a place where neither the Slavic accent, nor ethnic habits exclude you from the community. On the contrary, they help in rendering you “normal,” as you become one of many in a crowd of newcomers. On the other hand, for a man of letters, the circumstances of exile are predominantly of a linguistic nature. “What started as a private, intimate affair with the language,” says Josif Brodski, “in exile becomes fate – even before it becomes an obsession or a duty” (1990: 108). In other words, only in exile does one notice the dependence of language and imagination upon the community of understanding. “I cannot stand writing in a foreign language; I am incapable of it,” complained Miłosz (1985: 7) as late as 1977. This was not because of a simple inability to speak English. The problem stemmed from the fact that a thought addressed to a foreign reader is rooted “somewhere else,” determined by a different society, different language experiences, inexpressible, as each language has its own way of developing. However, there may come a time when a private struggle with language enters another dimension, acquiring a universal significance. Then a path opens to deeper regions of civilisation, to the very mechanisms conditioning consciousness and human communication. Only from such a perspective, incorporating the various phases of history and various regions of the globe, can a dialogue between cultures become a dialogue between equal voices. “Isn’t the same tongue,” asks Miłosz, “just an illusion where uncountable individual languages fill space with a jamming noise?” (2001a: 18).

One can say that, all in all, Miłosz laboured hard to acquaint himself with America from scratch, because he was not only preoccupied with the present state of American civilisation, but also with its contemporary lineage, going back to the Enlightenment. He would not have managed this
if he had not been turning into an American himself. The reasons why he remained a Polish poet in spite of this are fundamental but also enigmatic. It was not about the activity of writing; one can write texts in a foreign language and – as Joseph Conrad proved – write excellent novels. With poetry, as understood by Milosz, the matter is very different. Possibly the longing for an understanding beyond all borders stemming from inter-cultural differences is directed at a kind of mythical community. The protagonist of *The Issa Valley*, little Tomasz, in fact hungers for “a sort of impossible communion with living creatures” (1981b: 176). This is a shard of the paradise myth, a longing for the prelapsarian world. If, however, as Northrop Frye maintained, the primeval and most crucial function of poetry consists in constantly recreating the mythical potential of imagination, then such a longing at least deserves our respect. Actually, it may only be located in the language of childhood. Because the poetic imagination feeds on inexpressible verbal matter and its oldest stratum is naive, it dates back to a period when words somehow emerged from things:

And the word revealed out of darkness was: *pear*.
I hovered around it hopping or trying my wings.
But whenever I was just about to drink its sweetness, it withdrew.
So I tried Anjou – then a garden’s corner,
Scaling white paint of wooden shutters,
A dogwood bush and rusting of departed people.
So I tried Comice – then right away fields
Beyond this (not another) palisade, a brook, countryside.
So I tried Jargonelle, Bosc, and Bergamot.
No good. Between me and pear, equipages, countries.
And so I have to live, with this spell on me.
(Milosz 2001b: 183)

**Tempting Whitman**

The above quotation comes from Milosz’s first American poem; its title is significant: “Po ziemi naszej” (Throughout Our Land). Both English and French translators have used the plural form (“Throughout Our Lands,” “A travers nos terres”), effacing the element of transgression – the gesture of encompassing different areas of the earth, which remains an affirmation of the brotherhood of man. One of Walt Whitman’s later poems, “Unnamed
rally bound with: “Not a mark, not a record remains – and yet all remains” (Whitman 1959: 263). The earth is full of voices which await the poet’s words.

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Bibliography