Abstract: This article discusses the relationship between the American counterculture of the 1960s and Miłosz’s poetry created during that time in Berkeley. The poet observes the student revolt through his own experience with history, including his leftist sympathies. He is critical both of the naïve hippie postulates and Herbert Marcuse’s new version of Marxism. However, he treats counterculture as a symptomatic response to vital problems of the Western civilization in the second half of the twentieth century. He reflects upon the influence of art on power, totalitarian as well as democratic. He sees the necessity of commitment, though he asks about its form and effects. Countercultural experiments coincide also with Miłosz’s own search for “a more capacious form” and with the epiphanies described in his poems.

Key words: Czesław Miłosz, counterculture, engaged literature, Marxism, epiphany

Czesław Miłosz was a professor at the University of California since the autumn of 1960, when the counterculture was born and flourished there. For the American contestation Berkeley was a very important place. Aldona Jawłowska, the author of the still most important Polish study of this subject writes that the 1964 protest at the local university campus “was decisive for the further development of the student revolt in the USA” (Jawłowska 1975: 59–68; trans. M.B.). It marked the beginning of the biggest wave of riots that swept through America before 1969 (Marwick 1998: 536–546, 642–675).

It is from the Visions from San Francisco Bay, of course, that we can learn the most about Miłosz’s attitude to America, which was complex and not very favourable for the counterculture. Charging it with political naivety, lack of historical memory, superficial religiosity, and, most importantly, hypocrisy, Miłosz wrote about the American contestation that “[i]n
its most striking forms, the movement I am discussing is just such a transitory subculture, or, rather, it is one that melts into the general flow of fashion” (Miłosz 1982: 124). However, it is difficult not to notice that the counterculture remains one of the main topics in this volume of essays. It is undoubtedly interesting for the author, who perceives it as a major social force, a new intellectual and moral movement which is “one of the symptoms of America’s split into two mutually hostile parts” and can have a significant effect on changes in the Western civilization (Miłosz 1982: 124, 134). In this Miłosz perhaps overestimates the counterculture, putting it on a par with the American conservatism, although this hyperbole could be justified by the essayistic mode of writing. Walking through the Hippieland does not make him overly enthusiastic, but he does not shun the phenomenon either: he is eager for new aesthetic, religious and moral quests. He records his observations with irony, but not without an evident dose of liking for the young rebels, some of whom are, after all, his students. Another source of information about Miłosz’s attitude to the counterculture are his letters; he wrote about it to many important people, like Merton, Giedroyc, Jeleński, Wat and Marek Skwarnicki. A concise account of these epistolary exchanges was given by Andrzej Franaszek in his biography of Miłosz (Franaszek 2011: 606–608, 876). Franaszek shows that Miłosz agreed with many of the postulates of the student revolt, although he frequently treated it with sarcasm and disrespect. The most important of the postulates were: to oppose the war in Vietnam; to stand up in defence of the autonomy of the academia; and to show reluctance towards the Conservatives in power. Sadly, Franaszek limits his account to a few anecdotes only, and seems to underestimate it a little.

Miłosz’s reflection upon the greening America turns out to be less straightforward in his poetry. This becomes the most evident in his poems from the 1960s and 1970s, most of them collected in the volume City Without a Name published in 1969. It is Miłosz’s poems that I will chiefly refer to in the following part of this article.

Against the Revolution

Miłosz’s basic gesture lies in rejecting the countercultural ideology, especially in its extreme form and viewed as a new version of Marxism, which existed also among the influential left-wing élite. Characteristically,
Visions from San Francisco Bay end with a discussion of the views of his “colleague at the University of California.” This critique of Herbert Marcuse’s views should not come as a surprise, for it springs from the experience of an Eastern European intellectual, and Miłosz here confirms the rule rather than stands out as an exception, even if we take into account the complexity of his relationship with contemporary culture. His diagnosis is very similar to that of Leszek Kolakowski, who, a few years later, reproached the author of One-Dimensional Man for the derivative quality of his views on the effects of “modern technology and spiritual impoverishment,” writing in the third volume of the Main Currents of Marxism:

Marcuse’s programme (…): to destroy democratic institutions and tolerance in the name of a totalitarian myth, subjecting science and technology (…) to a nebulous ‘essential’ intuition which is the exclusive property of philosophers hostile to empiricism and positivism. There could hardly be a clearer instance of the replacement of Marx’s slogan ‘either socialism or barbarism’ by the version ‘socialism equals barbarism.’ And there is probably no other philosopher in our day who deserves as completely as Marcuse to be called the ideologist of obscurantism (Kolakowski 1981: 420).

In his discussion of Marcuse, Miłosz is more nuanced; he appreciates his revolutionary zeal, at the same time openly distancing himself from it. He launches a frontal attack on the most belligerent rebels. Both Kolakowski and Miłosz noticed here a possibility of a totalitarian utopia. Most importantly, however, Miłosz pointed out the negative nature of the counterculture’s political, or generally, philosophical proposal. The author of The Rising of the Sun perceived it as a rebellion against life itself. He called it an inherently romantic gesture against the Creator, or, in theological terms, a kind of temptation he was familiar with and knew it was easy to give in to. Miłosz could not accept any form of it. The final poetic cycle from the City Without a Name, entitled “Zapisane wczesnym rankiem mówą niezwiązana” (Written Early in the Morning in Unbound Speech) begins with a poem “Counsels,” and while it does contain the following statement concerning the Western civilization: “It’s true, I did not happen to see the triumph of justice,” it also contains the following lines:

There is so much death, and that is why affection for pigtails, bright-colored skirts in the wind, for paper boats no more durable than we are…

(Miłosz 2001: 237–238)
Bibliography


