Irresolute Heresiarch

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

This consideration of the poetry of Czesław Miłosz was originally intended to be part of a larger, comparative study dealing with four Catholic modernist poets. Besides Miłosz, it was to have included the French Canadian poet Hector de Saint-Denys Garneau, the Czech Jan Zahradníček, and the German Elisabeth Langgässer, fronted by an introductory discussion of what constitutes the Catholic poetic world-view. In my opinion, this centers on the idea of a sense-filled universe, as proclaimed by Dante Alighieri, and elaborated, in our times, in the poetry of T.S. Eliot.

The portion on Garneau was written first. The Miłosz section was complete, and most of my work on Jan Zahradníček was also done when I came to realize that the project had grown to unmanageable proportions. Either I must leave off my practice of in-depth explications de texte, and in so doing alter my focus from poetic communication to the poets themselves, or I must break up the project into smaller, individual monographs. Hopefully, they would eventually all see the light of day, and my original comparative scheme would be accomplished, available to all who had the patience and desire to consider it, over the space of several volumes. As I was unwilling to do the former, especially since I had gone so far with close readings of so many verses, I opted for the latter. That being the case, a few more words about the original context of this study might not be inappropriate before we begin our discussion on the poetic corpus of the Polish poet—especially since it was rather a surprise to me that I came to include Czesław Miłosz in my study at all.

My research into the topic of Catholic modernism[1] was helped along, to a great extent, by a generous Summer Research Grant in 2007 from King's College in Pennsylvania, where I have the honor and pleasure to teach. As stipulated by the grant, I gave a public presentation of my work in progress before the faculty in October of that year. After the presentation, one of my former colleagues wondered whether or not it was proper to speak of "modernism" and Catholicism in the same breath. Were not the Modernists inherently anti-Catholic? Did they not lead the charge, in the early years of the twentieth century, against a too facile acceptation of tradition, including the Catholic, Christian religious traditions of Europe? The point is well taken, and defensible. However, I

believe that it all boils down to one's definition of Modernism, especially in the Anglophone tradition. For besides such iconoclasts as Ezra Pound, H.D., E.E. Cummings and the sometimes decidedly anti-Catholic William Carlos Williams, we have the great paradox of T.S. Eliot. In his spiritual journey, which led him from Unitarianism through skepticism and a flirt with Eastern mysticism into (as he saw it) Catholicism as expressed in the English Church, this Anglo-American master, whom Pound once described as the "young man who has modernized himself," took Pound's slogan "Make it new!" as a religious and cultural, no less than poetic, imperative. From about 1925 on, Eliot began to expound the timeless truths of traditional, Catholic Christianity to a world that sees religion as something become irrelevant; to a "neutral" culture lacking the higher dream, lacking the cohesiveness provided by a real apprehension of the Eternal; to an age, as he put it in his Choruses to *The Rock*, "which advances progressively backwards." It is a curious paradox, but perhaps an expected one, given the essentially paradoxical nature of Christianity itself, that it is beginning with Eliot's first truly "Christian" poem, The Waste Land, that his great success among an often un-Christian reading public dates. It would be tedious and unnecessary to list the poets that Eliot has influenced since his artistic triumph. Suffice it to say that his Catholic "modernism" has sparked the imitative imagination of poets as different in their philosophical outlooks as Fr. Janusz Ihnatowicz (of Wilno, London and Houston), my own master, the Czech Catholic convert Rio Preisner, and the sometime-Marxist, always non-Catholic Tadeusz Różewicz, as well as the subject of this monograph, Czesław Miłosz himself.

Yet if the reader still objects to the linkage of "Catholic" and "Modernist" I will not quibble over terms. The literary arena which has captivated my attention for these past several years can equally be termed "Catholic Moderns" or "Contemporary Catholic Poets" without any objection from me. In order to clarify what I mean by a "Catholic Modernist," I would set forth the following guidelines. The Catholic Modernist is a twentieth or twenty-first century poet who:

- while he may not write strictly devotional or religious verse, considers the Catholic Weltanschauung as his own, his guide to life; the presence of which philosophy of life can be felt in his work;
- who, in literary-cultural terms, is spiritually akin and often overtly influenced by Dante Alighieri, assents to his spiritual cosmography, and aims at just such a holistic, traditionally Christian understanding of the universe as knowable, ruled by a loving and omniscient, just God; a universe that is not scattered leaves, but a book, bound together by Love.

Such was the starting point of my studies. It should be pointed out that, in discussing "Catholic" poetry, my intention has never been to proceed like the Marxist doctrinaires of the late forties and fifties, whose main critical endeavor was to divide all creative writing into stark, irreconcilable camps of "us" and "them," "progressive" and "reactionary" poets, "allowable" poetry, and scribblings to be repressed along with the scribblers. My intention has never been to present a poet, at the end of my consideration of his work, with a party card and a handshake, or, on the other hand, to set him on a blacklist of some sorts to be consulted by those who wish to eschew "heretical" writings. The very inclusion of Eliot as a foundation to my studies, should be enough to prove that my definition of "Catholic," in speaking of culture, is fairly elastic. In his case, it does not matter what I may think of the Anglican Communion, in his days or in the present; it is enough, for my purposes, to accept his assertion of Anglo-Catholicism, his devotion to the idea that, although an Anglican, he is a part of the Universal Church, and that he assents to "core" theological beliefs common to all who honestly call themselves Catholics, while divergence of opinion on matters of discipline, such as Papal primacy or the validity of Anglican orders, is a secondary, and really irrelevant matter. As we will see in a moment, the elasticity of my definition of what it means to be a Catholic writer is what enabled me to consider Miłosz in the first place.

The second matter to be considered was artistic relevance and importance. I wanted to study poets who:

- flourished or began their careers in earnest between the end of the First World War and the end of the Second;
- who eschew, or at least make elastic, traditional verse forms such as rhyme and meter;
- who, unlike Futurists, do not reject, but rather embrace traditional European culture, especially Greco-Roman culture, although they strive to "make it new" or relevant in the new situation of twentieth-century, mechanized society;
- who image forth the confusing times in which it was given them to live, at times via "dense" poetry (disjunction of sense, clashing of disparate images, collage technique), but who unlike Dadaists or Existentialists do not consider human existence absurd, the world pointless and unknowable.

Above all, I wanted to consider those poets who played a significant role in the artistic development of their particular poetic idiom. It was not difficult to identify three of them. For the French, the choice of Saint-Denys Garneau was obvious: his highly-crafted surrealistic verses—the

curious reader would do well to consider poems such as “Cage d’oiseau,” “Acceuil,” and “Un mort demande à boire”—are masterpieces of Francophone poetry; what is more, his pathological isolation offers a very distinct and individual poetic manner, in which a marvelous facility with modern poetic styles expresses a uniquely subjective voice, virtually unheard of since the nineteenth century. For the Czechs, Jan Zahradníček is, along with Vladimír Holan, one of the two decisive voices in the shaping of postwar Czech poetry. Germanists might have a bone to pick with my choice of Elisabeth Langgässer. However, the truly sublime way in which she recasts the ancient myth of Odysseus in “Frühling 1946,” dedicated to her daughter returning from a Nazi concentration camp, made of her a choice I could not pass over.

The reader may be surprised—as I certainly was—at how difficult it was to find a fitting representative from that most overtly Catholic nation of Poland. To put it simply, a consideration of twentieth century Polish poets led me to conclude that Polish poets were either very good, or Catholic. Unfortunately, one would have to fall into both camps to qualify for my particular study. Initially, I did not take Miłosz into consideration for several reasons. First, although I have always had a healthy respect for his importance to Polish poetry, and although several of his verses are among my favorite poems, there are quite a few Polish poets, ancient and modern, of whom I am much more fond. I believed at the time, and still do, that Stanisław Barańczak is the better poet, formally speaking. Perhaps this is a personal preference for quirky, inventive structure, but that is one way of measuring poets, and in none of his more traditionally crafted verses does Miłosz approach the technical finesse of the younger poet. I also believe that Zbigniew Herbert remains the more “pure” poet, with an ability to inventively narrate in incisive short forms that outstrips the more philosophical, more ponderous Miłosz in haecceitas. But Barańczak, a poet of the late sixties, comes too late to be grouped with the “modernist” generation (as defined above), and in any case, neither he nor Herbert can be described as a Catholic poet.

Certain poets of the Catholic tradition that fall within the proper timeframe, such as Kazimierz Wierzyński or Jan Lechoń, aren’t in the same league as Garneau and Zahradníček, and their inclusion would raise eyebrows among those familiar with the Polish tradition in letters. Wierzyński is a solid, if rather minor, poet, who developed a modern style only much, much later than the great stylists of the period Różewicz and Herbert, to say nothing of the idiosyncratic Miron Białoszewski. Lechoń, although interesting as an individual, never outgrew the tired, the very tired, diction of the Romantics.

While I acknowledge the significance of Czesław Miłosz as, all things considered, the most important Polish poet of the twentieth century, I never thought of him as a Catholic. Too often did he express a primitive paganism in his poems of the dark Lithuanian forests; too frequently did he declare, implicitly and explicitly, his dualistic convictions, his anti-Augustinian ideas of the incompatibility of evil and a wholly good God, his Manicheanism, for me to think of him as anything remotely approaching a Catholic poet.

But then he died. And in the controversy that erupted surrounding the plans for his entombment at Skałka—the Polish artistic pantheon at the Paulist church of St. Michael the Archangel in Kraków—there came to light the curious letter that he had written to Pope John Paul II, in which he expresses his lifelong devotion to the Church, and—what is most striking—asks for a written acknowledgement of his strivings to "express Catholic orthodoxy" in his poetry. This was something new! And thus was I led to a systematic consideration of his poetry, to see just what lay behind this claim. What I found is contained in the pages which follow.

The book is arranged chronologically. Chapter I deals with the poetry published or composed between 1933-1945, the prewar years and the years of Nazi-Soviet occupation, which Miłosz spent in Warsaw, and later Kraków. Chapter II, 1945-1960, covers those poems written or published after the war, while Miłosz was in the service of the communist-led Polish People's Republic. It includes poems written in Poland, and at his diplomatic postings in New York and Washington, D.C., up until his defection to France. In 1960, Miłosz was offered a teaching position at the University of California, Berkeley. He traveled to this country in that year, and stayed here for the next three decades, until his retirement from a position in the Slavic Department. Chapter III is concerned with poems written during these California years, from his arrival in the Bay Area until his reception of the Nobel Prize for Literature. Chapter IV, entitled "Berkeley and Stockholm," deals with the early eighties, when, because of the prize, Miłosz became an internationally recognized figure; while Chapter V, with which the book ends, covers his final years, his gradual re-location to Kraków, and his final collections of poetry, including *Wiersze ostatnie* [Final Verses], which was brought out posthumously by the Znak publishing house.

In the pages which follow I concern myself with the poetry, and only with the poetry. From time to time, references to Miłosz's prose works are made when appropriate, but this is intended to be a consideration of Miłosz the poet, rather than Miłosz the writer, or even Miłosz the man. Readers seeking a more comprehensive treatment of the entirety of his

works are due to be disappointed, but I beg their indulgence in consideration of the large amount of poetry covered. If all of his prose, not to mention his biography and ephemeral writings were to be considered, such a full attention could not be given to the verse.[2] Again, all of the poetry was considered, and, as far as it falls under the rubrics of our perspective:—poetry expressing religious sentiment—it was covered. This was not always an easy task, especially considering the very uneven quality of the poems of his latest period.

Thus, our discussion concerns the poetry of Czesław Miłosz. To what extent does it concern the person of Miłosz himself? It has always been a cardinal rule of mine, when critiquing poetry, to concentrate on the poem, and not the poet. However, the question of to what extent the poet can be identified with the poem's narrator is of particular moment in the case of Czesław Miłosz. When, in conversation with a person who knew Miłosz very well, I once remarked on the heterodox views, religious and otherwise, expressed in Miłosz's poetry, the friend responded without a moment's hesitation: "With Miłosz, there is the voice of the poetry, which is not always the voice of the man. There is often a distinction to be made between the religious views enunciated in the poetry, and the religious views held to by the man." In this, Miłosz perhaps comes close to Dante, but the Dante of the *Vita nuova*, rather than he of the *Divina commedia*. In that earlier work, the troubadour-trained Dante goes to great lengths to keep the identity of his *donna ideale*, Beatrice, secret, even resorting to the stratagem of employing a "screen"—a woman who believes herself to be, and whom others believe to be, the addressee of Dante's love poetry, while the real object of his ardor remains hidden, known only to himself. In the pages which follow, this "stratagem" of Miłosz's—which he himself acknowledged in *Nieobjęta ziemia* [The Unattainable Earth] and at a meeting of artists at the Vatican—we call his "inner orthodoxy." If we are to take him at his word in his essay "Wychowanie katolickie" ["A Catholic Upbringing"], this is something that he had carried with him since early childhood:

> The priest took me for an atheist, but he was mistaken. Of course it is true that I led him on in his error, out of selfish jealousy: that which is hidden, is dearer to us than it would be, if we declared it publicly.[3]

But these words must also be glanced off of what immediately follows them:

> Later in life I noticed the same inclination among crypto-Catholics belonging to the apparatus of the communist state. Their religiosity was

more fervent than that of the openly practicing faithful.

What stand do we take here? To what extent, if any, can one serve two masters, in this case God and Lenin? What weight are we to give to the public statements of people who are avowedly playing possum with their innermost convictions? This, as we shall see, will be a difficult thing to assess when dealing with the poetic expressions of Czesław Miłosz, especially those of his latter periods.

It is noteworthy that, in the paragraph just quoted, Miłosz passes no moral judgment. Nor should we, perhaps, but, in the context of literary criticism, we can set the following narrative question: Is this honest, this game of "what my narrator says, is not what I myself think?" It is believable, sustainable, in the case of a poet such as Robert Browning of the dramatic monologue, or Ezra Pound of the browningesque Personae, or John Donne when, in order to achieve a shocking baroque paradox, the *concors in discordia*, he speaks in the voice of a woman. But with a poet such as Czesław Miłosz, whose identifiable, real person often stands so baldly before us in the lines of his subjective lyrics? A poet so assertively himself as Miłosz, speaking the first person? It certainly makes the task of the critic no easier, who strives to preserve the clinical distinction between "poet" and "narrator." We would like, therefore, to take the man Czesław Miłosz out of the equation entirely, and to suggest that our study is not of the religious opinions of Czesław Miłosz, but rather the aspects of religion as expressed in the poetry of Czesław Miłosz. Whether or not we have been successful in this attempt is not for us to say.

At any rate, if Miłosz and others will convince us of the distinct realities of Miłosz-man and Miłosz-poet, that is, of the possible disjunct between what Miłosz says and what Miłosz actually believes, of the existence of a non-Miłoszian, so to speak, narrator who enunciates positions that Miłosz the poet need not necessarily ascribe to, we are, I believe, fully justified in making a similar split between what Miłosz enunciates as a poet, and what Miłosz enunciates in his prose. Again, this book is not a literary biography, nor is it an all-embracing approach to Miłosz's thought, as expressed in his correspondence, and his prose, as well as his poetry. It is, above all, a consideration of Catholic, and other religious themes in the poetry written by Czesław Miłosz, that poetic heresiarch who, in so unexpected a way, prostrated himself before the Pope.

One final note, before we begin our consideration of Miłosz's poetry. In 1981, after an absence of thirty years, Miłosz returned to Poland for a brief visit, during which he was awarded a doctorate *honoris causa* by the Catholic University of Lublin. Speaking to the assembled faculty and

students on that occasion, he took the opportunity to address the issue of Catholic poetry:

> Receiving this exalted distinction from an institution, which was engendered by the Department of Theology of the University of Vilnius, I feel obliged to state that I am not a Catholic poet. Whoever makes use of that epithet in literature assumes eo ipso that others, who do not identify themselves as such, are therefore not Catholic. This seems both doubtful to me, and in disaccord with the meaning of the word katholikos, which means universal, general. By introducing such distinctions, it is easy to lose sight of what unites people, rather than divides them. [4]

It seems to me that Miłosz is using the term "Catholic poet" in a manner in which I would not like to employ it. For Miłosz (extrapolating from the above statement), a "Catholic poet" is a person whose purpose in writing is to enunciate the truths of his faith; he is a propagandist in the same way that the later Tadeusz Borowski or postwar Jerzy Andrzejewski[5] were communist writers, i.e. persons employing their literary talents as a weapon in the class war the Party was waging. I, on the other hand, would employ the term in the manner of a naturalist who, on the basis of an animal's physiological makeup, will differentiate a mule deer from a white-tailed deer from an elk. For me, Miłosz may be considered a Catholic poet inasmuch as he may be labeled a Lithuanian poet, a Polish poet, a classically-trained poet, or a Californian poet. All of these things go into the makeup of the personality he cannot but express in his poetry. He is definitely not a Muslim poet, a Hungarian poet, a Beat poet, or a poet of the Argentinean pampas.

In his essay on religious poetry, T.S. Eliot speaks of his desire for a literature that is unconsciously Christian, i.e. for a literature that is not polemical in a Christian sense, but which reveals the opinions and manners of expressions of artists who are formed by an actively Christian culture. [6]Something approaching that can be seen in the work of the film director Krzysztof Zanussi, who once said of himself "I am not a Catholic artist; I am an artist who also happens to be Catholic." In a discussion of the films of Krzysztof Zanussi, we would not be concentrating on his screenplays insofar as they are cinematic catechisms. Rather, we would discuss, and indeed could not avoid discussing, the manner in which Catholic themes and viewpoints and problems are introduced, developed and thought through in his films. I propose to do the same with the verse of Czesław Miłosz.

In his essay "Religijność Zdziechowskiego" ["The Religiosity of Zdziechowski"] Miłosz himself approaches the matter in a similar way,

although he reaches a curious conclusion. There, he writes:

> To describe someone as a Catholic writer is not to describe him at all—because Catholicism, preserving an identicality of dogmas, takes on ever new forms, realizing itself ever anew, and by the very necessity of its struggle in a changing historical environment, it takes advantage of new manners of comprehending the world. Not only does each new age have a different Catholicism—but among Catholics near to one another in time there exist huge differences in religious style—depending on what element works on them most strongly, and what they give special emphasis to. Chesterton was a Catholic by virtue of his delight in the complexity of life, its fantasticality. Zdziechowski—because of his sense of the immensity and threat of evil. [7]

This quote of Miłosz's raises more questions than it answers. For example, is Catholicism a matter of religious "style?" What exactly is "religious style?" And is Catholicity nothing more than a manner of comprehending the world, or, rather, of engaging the world, responding to the world, from a habit of thought firmly grounded in Catholic bedrock? But more important are the words that we have italicized in the above citation and its English translation. The Catholicism of this or that author may differ from this one, or that one over there, but for them to truly be Catholic authors, they must express, or at least not deny, the core philosophical system that has developed in the Church over the past two thousand years. They must, at least to such an extent, be bound by that "identicality of dogmas." One cannot reject or disown Catholicism in one's writings and still be considered a Catholic writer. A question of integrity is broached when one speculates on the possibility of someone being Catholic in his personal life, yet expressing himself in un-Catholic or even anti-Catholic manners in his art. It is too simplistic to suggest that such a person is like the stubborn little boy who says "I didn't do it!" when called out on a lie. However, one can look at the body of art produced by that person as a phenomenon sui generis, without relation to its author, and pass judgment on its philosophical expressions distinct from those held, or not held, by that author. In this respect, we may well find that Czesław Miłosz was a Catholic, but the philosophical thrust of his poetic oeuvre is anything but.[8]

I am belaboring this rather obvious point, because a reader of this book in manuscript suggested that he was still unsure of what I mean by the term "Catholic poet." I would think that the definition given in the opening pages of this introduction should answer that question. However, if further clarification is needed to settle the matter, I think that one need go no farther than a comparison of the religious views expressed in a given

poet's written work with the expressions of faith listed in the Nicene Creed. A poet who expresses the nature of God in accordance with Trinitarian theology is speaking like a Catholic; a poet who expresses an understanding of the person of Christ as a created being may call himself a Christian, but he is certainly not speaking like a Catholic. He speaks with the voice of an Arian, a Unitarian, or perhaps a Latter Day Saint. A poet who acquiesces to the doctrine of the resurrection of the body is speaking in a Catholic manner. A poet who negates that, *eo ipso* puts himself outside of the "Catholic" classification. To press on just a bit further, although he may not agree with the traditional Aquinian theology of transubstantiation, in speaking of the Eucharist, the poet must acknowledge the Real Presence of Christ in the sacrament (not merely a symbolic presence, but a real, physical presence) to be himself acknowledged as in line with Catholic orthodoxy. I believe that this is a fair approach to the question, regardless of what one thinks of Catholic theology. An atheist can successfully classify poets according to this objective measuring stick. One needn't be a tortoise or a lizard oneself in order to correctly recognize certain animals as reptiles. Nor need one cherish a particular fondness for them.

*

Most, if not all, of the poems of Czesław Miłosz have been translated into English. Robert Hass' name is most often associated with English versions of Miłosz's poetry, and his translations hold a special weight, as quite often, the poet himself aided in bringing them over into English. However, in the discussions which follow, I base my observations entirely upon the Polish originals of Miłosz's poetry. I read Polish with a native fluency, and thus have never had a need to consult English versions of the poems, save in comparative studies of the art of translation, or in sharing them in a classroom setting with non-Polish speakers — and even in such cases of mixed critical discussion, I myself always work from the original Polish. For various reasons, chief among them being concerns of space, I offer only simple prose translations of the poems I comment upon in this book, as evidentiary illustrations of my criticism. This is not the optimal *modus operandi*, as, ideally, a poet ought to be met upon his own ground by his readers, without the intermediary filter of a translator. However, in the present case, I believe that this system is not unreasonable. First of all, many of the readers of this book will not possess a facility with the Polish language, and thus quotes in the original tongue will be of no use to them. Second, those Polish speakers who would like to check my criticism

against the originals will have little trouble in doing so, as the Polish poems are readily available in print, and, chances are, they will be lying in arm's reach of such readers, on their own bookshelves. Thirdly, as I point out above, I the critic am not working through an English filter, but directly dealing with the Polish text, which, I believe, is the only honest manner of doing literary criticism. I am commenting directly upon the poems of Czesław Miłosz, and not Czesław Miłosz as Robert Hass or Peter Dale Scott present him to me.[9] The prose translations I offer are not poems in their own right. They are prose trots, as faithful to the literal sense of my critical understanding of the Polish originals as I, and the English language, can make them. Fourth and finally, Czesław Miłosz, though a fine poet, was not a metrical innovator. He is a lucid, classical poet working in very sober forms, which add little, if anything, to the understanding of the thought expressed in the content of the words themselves. As a matter of fact, his metrical line is sometimes so slack, especially in the verses of his final years, as to seem little differentiated from prose unless merely by rather arbitrary line breaks. Whenever he does attempt a significant formal effect, which is an infrequent occurrence, or whenever the Polish text requires a closer explanation because of alternate possible readings or puns, the text will be quoted briefly in the original, with, I hope, an adequate explanation of the anomaly in question.

Flagstaff, AZ, October 22, 2009

Since this introduction was written, portions of this book have appeared in different form, elsewhere. For example, information from Chapter III was utilized for my recent article "Samotność i hermetyczność w wierszach amerykańskich Czesława Miłosza" ["Loneliness and Hermeticism in the American Poems of Czesław Miłosz"] which appeared in the Polish periodical *Odra* MMXI (2011) 5:58-66. I also relied on this text for my presentation "The Enemy Within: the Dialogic Verse of Czesław Miłosz," given at the 2011 convention of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association, Scottsdale, AZ, October 7, 2011.

Scottsdale, AZ, October 8, 2011.

Notes

[1] "Catholic literary modernism" might be a more precise descriptive tag. My study has nothing to do with the nineteenth-century phenomenon of theological Modernism.

[2] Even so pro-Miłosz a critic as Aleksander Fiut will acknowledge the "discrepancies" to be found between "the convictions that Miłosz expresses in his poetry and those expressed in his prose," although, in his opinion, they are not "crucial." In our discussion of the poetry by itself, we will have more than enough philosophical "discrepancies" to deal with. For Fiut, see his seminal The Eternal Moment. The Poetry of Czesław Miłosz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p 88.

[3] Ceszław Miłosz, "Wychowanie katolickie" ["A Catholic Upbringing"], originally published in *Rodzinna Europa* [*Familial Europe*, trans. into English as *Native Realm*], pp. 61-77. Our text comes from Miłosz, *Metafizyczna pauza* [*A Metaphysical Pause*] (Kraków: Znak, 1989), pp. 29-49, p. 44.

[4] Miłosz, speech at Catholic University of Lublin, cited by Joanna Gromek in her introduction to *Metafizyczna pauza*, p. 7.

[5] Both writers discussed in Miłosz's famous Zniewolony umysł [Captive Mind].

[6] See Eliot's 1935 essay "Religious Literature," Frank Kermode, ed. *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), p. 100.

[7] *Metafizyczna pauza*, p. 118.

[8] Interesting in this very regard is the case of that most talented and most intriguing of all the Beats, Jack Kerouac. Whatever his spiritual peregrinations may have been, Kerouac never succeeded in completely suppressing his Catholic upbringing. This can be found in many passages of his autobiographically-fueled work; readers of Kerouac will of course recall the harrowing, nearly psychotic experience toward the end of *Big Sur*, when the only thing that calms the narrator assailed by an inimical world is the sudden vision of the Cross in the skies. Near the same passage, there occurs an interesting Freudian slip; Kerouac awakes in the night certain that his houseguests are conspiring against him, "because I am a Catholic." It is an interesting confession, at a moment of hyper-tension, when truths are usually squeezed out of us in a panic. But however "Catholic" Kerouac may have been in his personal beliefs or psychic makeup, Kerouac the author of some of the, gently speaking, syncretistic poems in the *Book of Sketches* cannot be considered a Catholic by the widest stretch of the imagination.

[9] I give one example of the danger a critic runs by relying on translations, rather than original poems. The English version of "Po ziemi naszej" as printed in the (revised) edition of Miłosz's *Selected Poems* (New York: Ecco Press, 1980), mistranslates the Polish word płaszcz (cloak) as "clock." And so, in the concluding lines of verse nr. 12 on p. 87 we have mention of the Indians of the California coast sewing "a clock from the plumage of flickers, / hummingbirds, and tanagers." Now, the Native Americans may have been expert avian tailors, but clockmakers? And out of *feathers*?

CHAPTER ONE

YOUTH AND WAR: 1933-1945

In terms of historical significance, Czesław Miłosz is the one of the few peers of T.S. Eliot among contemporary poets. Like Eliot, he was a Nobel prize winner; more importantly, like Eliot, he has enjoyed a significance of influence beyond the confines of his own language, affecting the work of poets who might perhaps never have glanced toward Poland had it not been for his poetry. Such is the conclusion that Václav Burian, Czech poet and translator, came to after learning of Miłosz's passing in 2004, amidst the controversy surrounding his funeral: "How many of us, foreigners, came to love Poland in no small measure thanks to the Not-quite-Polish-enough Miłosz!"[1] Among Anglophone poets influenced by Miłosz might be named: Robert Pinsky, Robert Hass, and Seamus Heaney, himself a member of the exclusive Stockholm club. No mean feat for a person exclusively, stubbornly, devoted to composing in the parochial language of Polish despite (and perhaps ironically because of) a three-decade-long exile in California.

One would be hard put to find a person familiar with the topic who would suggest another candidate for the title of "most important figure in 20th century Polish literature." Yet no sooner had Miłosz passed away in Kraków on August 14, 2004, at the age of 93, than a firestorm broke out in the Polish press. Contrary to the wishes of the poet, who wanted to be buried in his family's plot in Lithuania, the "representatives of the intellectual and cultural milieux of Kraków,"[2] in concert with the municipal authorities of Miłosz's adopted city, decided upon an elaborate funeral with the Krypta Zasłużonych [Crypt of the Meritorious], the Polish pantheon at the Church "Na Skałce" in the shadow of Wawel Castle, as his final resting place.

One might wonder why the controversy arose in the first place. Yet, oddly enough, poetry had nothing to do with it. It was a nationalistic-patriotic affair, ignited by an interview given by a retired professor of Polish literature from Kraków, on the pages of *Nasz dziennik* [*Our Daily*],

a periodical of a strong nationalistic (some would say xenophobic) character. In the interview,[3] it was suggested that the poetry of Miłosz is anything but "Polish" in the patriotic sense of the word, and for that reason, he does not deserve interment alongside the more "acceptable" artists resting in the crypts of the Pauline church.

The controversy is long over. The funeral went off without a hitch: the streets of Kraków were filled to overflowing with people paying their last respects to the so-called "Prince of Poets," and giving vibrant witness to the overwhelming opinion of Miłosz's countrymen concerning his person, his significance, and the debt owed to his memory. We mention it here for one reason and one reason only. While the main thrust of the hubbub was political, i.e. "Was Miłosz Polish enough to be buried in so exalted a locale," nearly everyone overlooked the more salient question: "Was Miłosz Catholic enough to be buried in a church?"[4] Ironically, this question seems to have nagged Miłosz himself. For at the poet's funeral, a telegram from Pope John Paul II was read aloud, in which it was revealed that Miłosz had written a letter to the Holy Father—the last letter he wrote to him—in which he basically asked for an *imprimatur* and *nihil obstat* after the fact, as it were, concerning the Catholicity of his writings. John Paul quoted the salient part of Miłosz's letter:

> "Wiek zmienia perspektywę i kiedy byłem młody zwracanie się przez poetę o błogosławieństwo papieskie uchodziło za niestosowność. A to właśnie jest przedmiotem mojej troski, bo w ciągu ostatnich lat pisałem wiersze z myślą o nieodbieganiu od katolickiej ortodoksji i nie wiem, jak w rezultacie to wychodziło. Proszę więc o słowa potwierdzające moje dążenie do wspólnego nam celu. Oby spełniła się obietnica Chrystusowa w dzień Zmartwychwstania Pańskiego."[5]
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> [As one ages, one's perspective changes. When I was young, it was considered unseemly for a poet to ask the Pope for his blessing. And yet this is now the object of my concern, for over the last few years I have striven to write poetry that should not depart from Catholic orthodoxy, and I don't know how successful I have been. I humbly beg therefore of a word or two confirming my striving towards our common goal. May the promises of Christ be fulfilled on the day of His Resurrection.]

Yet why should Miłosz feel compelled to write his letter to the Pope in the first place? At the risk of being accused ourselves of piling up citations out of context, we offer the following few examples from Miłosz's prose, indicative of the pull he sometimes felt towards gnosticism, dualism, and Manicheism. In 1977, he wrote in *Ziemia Ulro* [*The Land of Ulro*]: "In my opinion, […] a certain Manichean component is necessary to us, and

difficult to avoid."[6] The itch toward dualistic thinking makes its appearance in his prose even earlier, in that *annus horribilis* that was 1969, which Miłosz witnessed from the very front lines at UC Berkeley. In *Visions from San Francisco Bay*, a book of essays published that year, he writes:

> One way or the other, I bear the stamp of civilization, and if I guard against using standards which are too human, the alien Other besieges me all the more and I can derive no law for myself from its laws. My contemporaries (strongly affected by Manichaeanism, and, like it or not, I am one of them), have moved far from any doctrines espousing harmony with nature and the wise acceptance of its rhythms as a guide to behavior; paralyzed by the animal in themselves (once caged in by the Soul, Reason), they have sought the Spirit passionately, but since God has been withdrawing, losing His attributes, Spirit can now be only human, the sole maker of distinctions between good and evil, set in opposition to a universe which knows neither good nor evil. Though suspicious of what I have received form other people while living among them—listening to their lectures, submitting to their influences—I do discover in myself a deep-rooted conviction of aloneness, mine and man's, in the face of limitless space, in motion yet empty, from which no voice reaches down speaking a language I can feel and understand.[7]

Later in the same text, he speaks even more clearly:

> I am, thus, frankly pessimistic in appraising life, for it is chiefly composed of pain and the fear of death, and it seems to me that a man who has succeeded in living a day without physical suffering should consider himself perfectly happy. The Prince of This World is also the Prince of Lies and the Prince of Darkness. The old Iranian myths about the struggle of Darkness with Light, Ahriman against Ormazd, suit me perfectly.[8]

But dualistic thought, if we are to consider such sentiments to be of good coin, and not ironic, has been with the poet since his youth. In one of his latter prose works, his personal encyclopedia Miłosz's ABC, he speaks of the effect that the sudden death of his school friend Alik Protasiewicz had on him. It was, he says there, "my first encounter with the cruelty of God."[9] As late as 1991, in an interview with Adam Michnik, in response to the question "Have you always been a believer?" he answered:

> Not at all. A woman friend of mine, who's no longer living, once wrote to me, "Your whole life, you have always said both yes and no." This reminds me of Pascal's idea that "to believe, to err, to doubt, are to man what running is to a horse."[10]

These are not excerpts from his poetry or occasional fiction. Thus, we are deprived of the handy rationalization that the speaker of such words is not necessarily the writer. These are all excerpts from Miłosz's essays, and essays, especially autobiographical ones, always invite us to trust the author to reveal what he actually is thinking, straightforwardly, and without any literary sleight of hand. Such essays are, really, letters to the editor writ large.

We offer them here not as ammunition for those who would exclude Miłosz from the bosom of the Church to which he felt such a strong attachment and responsibility in his latter days, that he would even approach the Holy Father himself with what can only be understood as an anguished plea for understanding and recognition. We set them out only so as to underscore the logic of those who reacted with astonishment to the burial plans of this man who seemed, at times, so very heterodox. I am speaking here only of those who read his works, not those larger mobs who, affected by what was written in *Nasz dziennik*, or by simple hearsay, casually joined in the damning chorus. For such were the opinions of Czesław Miłosz, disseminated in print, and thus accessible, to those who chose to read them. His letter to John Paul II, so different in tenor from anything that had earlier come from his pen, was a private communication and unavailable to anyone, until it was read on the day of his funeral, over his coffin in the Basilica of St. Mary on the Main Market Square. It comes as no surprise that it was greeted with amazement, and perhaps a number of cynical grins, by those who knew the poet only from his public writings.

It was another side of the complicated person that was Czesław Miłosz, the private man and the anxious seeker, that was revealed at the funeral. In the words of Archbishop Józef Życiński, who gave the homily at the funeral Mass:

> Czesław Miłosz's searchings in the theological depths were difficult for those accustomed to the differing patterns of laicized culture to understand. In 1978, when his collection *Bells in Winter* appeared in English, Leonard Nathan, an American critic, asked the poet why he so often introduces religious themes to his works. In reply he heard, "Oh, well. I am a member of the Roman Catholic Church." That difference of perspective in the grasping of the phenomenon of Miłosz teaches us humility, reminding us, that no one is in the position to impose his or her own "uniquely valid and proper" interpretation of this poetry, as the riches of its contents pass beyond simple interpretative schematics.[11]

Of course, an asterisk needs to be placed against the last sentences of the Archbishop's sermon. In his justified desire to guard against the oversimplified, uncontextualized partisan attacks that so sadly marred the passing of the great poet, the Archbishop (forgivably, himself not being a literary critic) comes close to endorsing the undergraduate fallacy that no "proper" interpretations of poetry are possible—that criticism is an exercise in subjectivity. That, of course, is patently untrue, and in our consideration of Czesław Miłosz as a Catholic poet, we will be bold to set forth our interpretations of his art, which, while not claiming exclusivity, will certainly claim to be proper in that they are based firmly upon the texts themselves. What Archbishop Życiński does well to remind us of, however, is the critic's obligation of humility. As in the case of another great man who toyed with Manicheanism, St. Augustine, in Miłosz "there beat a restless heart in search of God,"[12] and our consideration of his poetry, chronological in the main, will be to follow the process which was Miłosz's search until he was finally able to jettison his gnostic baggage and declare himself the "master of vanquished despair."[13] In this way, Miłosz may appear to us as the most open of all poets claiming to be Catholics; an artist who, like Augustine in his *Confessions*, lays bear before us his struggles and missteps, as well as his triumphs and teachings. Perhaps we shall see that, in the end, the "private" Miłosz was speaking to us all the while.

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The caesuras in Czesław Miłosz's life are many, and more than one of them coincides with the history of the twentieth century. Few of the tragedies that effected Europe, especially Central and Eastern Europe, during the past century failed to leave their scars on his back. When in the late 1960s he facilitated the recordings of Aleksander Wat's memoirs, later published with the title *Mój wiek* [*My Century*], in a very real sense, Miłosz might appropriate this title to sum up his own poetic output, which was especially attuned to, and affected by, the history that swept round him, and swept him from place to place on its current. For this reason, it is proper to consider his poetry in a generally chronological fashion. This first chapter concerns the writings of the young poet—a young poet forced to grow up fast indeed because of three wars, one socialist revolution, and a double-occupation of his homeland that was to last for fifty years. During this first period, Miłosz grew to adulthood in his native Lithuania, studied at the Stefan Batory University in Wilno (Vilnius), traveled to Paris and Italy, returned to Warsaw to work in Polish Radio, and,

eventually, survived World War II in Poland, a nation tortured by Nazi and Soviet like no other during that period. It comprises three main collections of his verse: the prewar Poemat o czasie zastygłym [*A Poem on Frozen Time*, 1933], *Trzy zimy* [*Three Winters*, 1936] and the postwar *Ocalenie* [*Rescue*, 1945]. Of these three, the first, *Poemat o czasie zastyglym*, is not only the most youthful, it is also the most concerned with social questions and least with religion.[14] Therefore, our discussion will concentrate mainly on the second two, in which the young poet matures, very quickly, to a consideration of questions of a more general and metaphysical cast.

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Gnosticism of all stripes forms a necessarily dualistic system. In its more drastic forms, it sets up an eternal dance of a "good" god in opposition to a "bad" god, and even if the cataclysmic denouement is to result in the victory of the good god of light over the bad god of darkness, this optimistic resolution is stall far off in the future; all that a human being knows here below is the interminable dance. This metaphysical situation panders to a natural, pessimistic resignation, and the solace it offers is that admitted to by Miłosz himself in his above-cited comments on Iranian cosmogony. In those gnostic sects that call themselves Christian, the dualistic split usually comes between matter and spirit, with the former being rejected as necessarily evil, and the latter adhered to as good. Now, despite all his cynical or exasperated declarations of Manicheanism, the young narrator of Miłosz's poems is, rather, Christian through and through; almost despite himself, one might say. For even at those passes where he seems to balance matter and spirit against one another, his devotion to the material world comes out on top; he displays a healthy devotion to tactile reality.

> Because that's what weeks, months and years are for; and the pain of wisdom / so we might learn to call a tree a tree, a man a man, and a star, a star. [15]

Thus read lines 21-22 of "Dytyramb" ["Dithyramb"]. Where gnostics worthy the name find their salvific "wisdom" in esoteric, hidden "knowledge" which has little, if anything, to do with the reality of the world they wish to impose it upon, here the narrator sets forth a purely Christian path toward knowledge, which begins with a basic, tautological understanding of the created world. As he puts it in the earlier verse "Rano" ["Morning"], though with a youthful enthusiasm that leads him

near a crowding out of the spirit himself, in preference to his subjectively enjoyed physical existence:

> I love matter, which is nothing other than a spinning mirror. / I love the movement of my blood, the only cause of the world's existence. / I believe in the destructibility of all that exists. So as not to lose my path, I have on my hand a blue map of veins. (15-18)

Czech poet Rio Preisner, Miłosz's junior by thirteen years, was to express a similar thought to that found in "Dithyramb" decades later in his *Kritika totalitarismu* [*Critique of Totalitarianism*]:

> In certain sublime moments, if I smell a flower, say, dig my fingers into hot sand, pass my hand over the rough surface of a cliff or gaze at the pebbly bed of a shallow stream, it seems to me, not literally, of course, but all the same, as if I became again the child I was. Now, when I think more closely upon this phenomenon, it always occurs to me that *real* childhood, its foundation, is to be found in an absolutely unique observation of the essence of being. Here at last I begin to sense the real significance of the words of Christ, "unless you become as little children…"[16] that is, unless you come to look upon and acknowledge being, the creative opus of God the Father, you will not enter into the kingdom of Heaven. In adulthood, the child's manner of considering being and existence can develop into a reappraisal, a recognition of existence and being. In this sense, philosophers of *ens* are really just grown-up children.[17]

Miłosz develops a similar thought in lines 35-44 of the poem under our present consideration:

> And so we begin the splendid journey, amazed, that one has to wait so long / for beauty, which ought to be visible, / and easy, even for a child. For that new order / of forms reborn, greedily expressing / the truth, which ought to shake the continents, while she / arrives quietly and evening is no longer evening, / burden no longer burden / and destiny no longer that same destiny. / For the bolt falls and splits the earthen house. / Good is here and evil is here. And immortality awaits.

Tangible reality—it is interesting how both poets suggest that this is a matter of common sense, accessible even to children—is the basis and foundation of all metaphysics, indeed of all human behavior. Right is here, wrong is there, and it takes no great intellectual effort to recognize the difference and choose between them. Preisner, speaking of Plato and his idealism, writes:

> Now, the struggle for transcendence first presented Plato with a vastly intricate challenge: to prove the relation between absolute being (the ideal) and transitory being, the foundation of all ontology; to explain how it is possible that transitory phenomena not only can, but *must* have a basis in non-transitory being. Here, for the first time, philosophy passed from the cleverness of the Sophists to what Plato called wisdom.[18]

Miłosz too leaves little room for relativism. If he does at times wheel close to pessimism, it is a pessimism of exasperation, irritated by his fellow human beings' inability to grasp what is obvious to the smallest child. The Christian viewpoint shared by both poets is summed up by Miłosz in his parable "Słońce" ["The Sun"], a short poem bearing the date "Warsaw, 1943," which brings the cycle "Świat (poema naiwne)" ["The World (a Naïve Verse Cycle)"] to a close:

> Whoever wishes to paint the world in a colorful figure, / let him never look directly at the sun. / Because he will forget the memories of things he has seen, / and all that will remain in his eyes will be burning tears. // Let him rather fall to his knees, bend his face to the grass / and gaze at the sunbeam reflected from the earth. / There he will find everything that we have abandoned: / Stars and roses, and dusks and dawns. (5-12)

There is a metaphysical reality, as well as a purely physical sphere, that makes up our life here on earth. Both of these are knowable—to an adequate degree—and the pursuit of this knowledge is a requisite of the good life; for on our proper understanding of eternal truths depend our proper actions in our daily lives. Yet to arrive at that knowledge, our journey toward immortality, noted in "Dytyramb," must begin at the proper setting-off point: from here, real temporality, to there, the as yet ungrasped eternal—and not the other way around.[19] It is a trip for which the children and the childlike are best suited, with their "naïve" and practical approach to the world. The "great and wise," who are often too wise for their own good, are more likely to lose their way at the very start by setting up an orientation point too high to be measured with their puny instruments of triangularization.

At this point, a slight digression may be in order. In our desire to separate the poetic persona of the speaker from the real person of the poet, we run the risk, in the next few chapters, of applying the doctrine of "inner orthodoxy" a bit too widely, too early. It is important to recall that in Miłosz's letter to the Pope, in which he speaks of the Catholic strivings of his latter writings, the important term is "latter writings." Critics such as Adam Czerniawski remind us that, whatever his religious or devotional practices throughout his life, Miłosz's philosophical return to Catholicism

was an occurrence of his later years.[20] It is not necessarily true that Miłosz's claim that non-Catholic expressions in his poetry do not reflect the Catholic viewpoints he actually holds as a man ("inner orthodoxy"), which applies to his later years, applies equally to his earlier, pre-1990s years. This is because, in so many places, he suggests that he rebelled against Christianity and the Church as a young man. Thus far our *caveat lector*. By the same token, it is surprising how very Christian many of his earlier poems sound, despite this fact; looked at chronologically, it almost seems that the closer Miłosz drew to the Catholic Church, the more ambivalently Christian, not to say unchristian, are the expressions found in his poetry.

To return to the topic at hand, again, Miłosz's narrator is not rejecting the ideal in favor of the real, rather, he is setting forth the proper manner of obtaining it. At such moments, the voice he employs takes on the mantle of the prophet. In the poem "20 lutego 1938 roku" ["February 20, 1938"], he writes:

> When the fires are finally quiet, and the springtime sobbing / arises over the earth, pure, washed free of the dust of battles, / When the hymn of thanksgiving rumbles, and the wheat of the fields / will be like the grace of God, a greeting of love, // Then, Jarosław, the Lord of Glory will come / and bend His wise brows over the book of the dead / and He will ask—He alone—did we believe / in a greater truth, in the holiness of this land so gracious.(1-8)

It is important to note that the narrator here emphasizes the unique right of the "king of glory," i.e. Christ, to pose the question of faith, of orientation, as He bends over the "book of the dead." Although the question is directed at our appreciation of the sanctity of the earth, at bottom it is He who becomes the implied orientation point to which all compasses on this earthly march must be set:

> And so we, if there exists in us faith in real time, / in the power of unearthly tenancy, in the gift of vision, / are perhaps once more baptizers by living water, / so that, when the Son does come, he might tear the veil from our eyes. (13-16)

Miłosz's devotion to the real, the tangible, is something he carries with him from his early childhood. It is the deepest characteristic of his identity as Lithuanian—along with aspects of pagan pantheism, as we will later see—expressed programmatically by the young cosmopolitan, who visited both Paris and Italy before the war, in the long poem "Hymn:"

> […] I, faithful son of the black earth, will return to the black earth, / as if life had never been, / as if song and word were created / not by my heart, not by my blood, / not by my enduring, / but by an unknown voice, impersonal, / the very smack of the waves, the very choir of the winds, the very autumnal swaying / of high trees. (11-18)

It is not without import that the narrator here describes himself as a "faithful son of the black earth," for a few lines down, he will state that he "has no faith." No religious faith? No faith in anything beyond himself? We can at least say that Miłosz's metaphysic here is something rooted in tangible reality—the narrator of this poem is just as natural and organic a growth of that "black earth" as the trees to which he lends his voice. In his later poetry, we will see the elder Miłosz speaking of "someone else" expressing things through him. At that time, in his California despair, that "voice" will be darker, perhaps menacing. Here, he makes himself a reed in the mouth of pure nature—the scission of his poetic voice—pantheistic here—has not yet taken on a demonic timbre.

Insofar as his narrator can be identified with himself, Miłosz suggests in his early poetry that his devotion to reality, to real nature, is something given him by his mother, whom, in contrast to his father (whom he recalls as a man of culture, a guide to the adventure that is the wide world outside, but through books)[21]—he remembers in colors that identify her strongly with nature. Witness "Przy piwoniach" ["By the Peonies"] from that cycle "Świat:"

> The peonies are blooming, white and rose, […] // My mother stands near the bed of peonies, / reaches for one and bends apart its petals, / gazing long into the flowery nations, / for which a moment is sometimes an entire year. // Then she lets the flower go, and what she thinks, she repeats / aloud, to the children and to herself. / And the wind rocks the green leaves, / and leopard-spots of light race over our faces. (1; 5-12)

Ewa Sławek comments on the mother here: "Her activity is implosive: she opens objects and considers them from the interior."[22] All right, but what she says, she reveals to the children, but not to us. This is intimate and feminine; it is also a hidden knowledge, appreciable perhaps only by those "faithful sons of the black earth," and, in that way, it is as close as Miłosz's narrator comes at this point to the esoteric "hidden salvific knowledge" of the gnostics, whose company he was later to seek out. But unlike gnostic knowledge, this is something that *can* be apprehended by anyone who wishes to learn it: from the earth, as it arises, not from those airy ladder-filled regions of the fabricated cosmos, but from the real, tactile ground from which we, the beetles and the peonies grow.[23] What is

more, the mother's fecundity is that of the "black earth" itself, and she, here, is the truly organic link between him and it; she is both his actual mother, and Mother Earth.

As we have seen, perceptible nature can reveal, especially to the poet's eye, the eternal substructure that lies just beneath it. It is signpost or allegory (in Bishop Butler's sense), rather than its opposite, its concrete denial. In "Wyprawa do lasu" ["Forest Excursion"], Miłosz's narrator catches sight of the world of wonders in a spontaneous manner that recalls Gerard Manley Hopkins:

> And there above us, a feast. Pitchers of gold, / red wine in birchen copper. / And the chariot of the winds / carries gifts for invisible kings, or bears. (9-12)

And it is this aptitude for "piercing the veil," which caused Garneau so much agony; an aptitude bestowed upon Miłosz by the rural Lithuania of his youth (and, ironically, withheld at times from Garneau *despite* his fevered attachment to rural Québec),[24] that gives Miłosz the "power, that rips apart the world," of which he speaks in the afore-cited "Hymn:"

> There is no one standing between you and me, / and power has been given me. / White mountains are at pasture on the earthly plains, / they move to the sea, to their waterhole, / ever new suns bend down / over the valley of the small dark river where I was born. / I possess neither wisdom, nor skill, nor faith / but I have been given power, and she will tear the world apart. (19-26)

Now, this is a "shining forth" of a different quality than that which captivates Hopkins, because, as we have already said, it is a metaphysical sense that, at times, stops at the threshold of natural wonder, and goes no further, seems unable to go any further, to contact its very center: God, Christ, Hopkins' "Grandeur of God." In this poem, written three years before the "20 II 1938" with its apocalyptic message of the Lord of Glory and its faith in a "greater truth," the poet's narrator, in Paris, says he has "no faith." [25]And yet to Whom is the "Hymn" addressed? Who is he calling to, what overwhelming Person, before Whom he speaks on behalf of "Youth," youth about to be trampled; completely at the behest of that Person who can give some salt, wine, bread to these, while withholding it from others?

> But between states coming to existence from the depths of seas, / between extinct streets, in place of which / mountains built from a fallen world rise up, / everything, which has passed, everything which will pass / is

> defended by youth, pure as solar dust, / in love neither will good, nor with evil, / stretched out beneath your giant feet / so that you might trample it, walk over it, / so that you might move the wheel with your breath / from the revolution of which the transient structure shivered, / so that you should give it (youth) hunger, and others salt, wine and bread. // […] The voice of the horn is not yet heard / that will call together the scattered who lie in the valleys. / The wheel of the last wagon does not yet thunder over the frozen clods. / There is no one standing between you and me.] (48-58; 73-76)

If it is God that the poet is speaking to here—and who else might fit those huge footprints he is pointing at?—the seeming paradox of addressing Someone in Whom one confesses to lack faith is explained, once more, by reference to that characteristic of the young Miłosz's writing that we see as so preeminent: tangible reality. The same—superstitious—person who would later confess to being haunted by the metaphysical consequences arising from killing a snake (looked upon benignly in rural Lithuania)[26] rejects "faith" as an attitude, the object of which cannot, by definition, be directly experienced by the senses. Miłosz's narrator is not denying the existence of God here; rather, he is—overboldly, perhaps—demanding that God show Himself to him, as clearly and tangibly as that unfortunate water snake. The statement *Nikogo nie ma* pomiędzy tobą i mną ["There is nobody standing between you and me"], then, with which the poem begins and ends, is a challenge of sorts. "Look," the narrator seems to be insisting, "there is nothing to impede Your real progress to me, nothing in the way. Come on, then, show Yourself."

The Polish ear hears echoes of that other great Lithuanian, Adam Mickiewicz, who in the Great Improvisation scene of his drama *Dziady* [*Forefathers' Eve*] has his poet-shaman-hero Konrad call God out in just such a manner, after just such a claim to possessing the power of tearing worlds apart.[27] The Catholic ear hears these implied accusations of the distance of God, and wonders—What on earth is more real and tangible than God in the Eucharist? Both Miłosz, and Descartes before him, seem to entirely overlook the "real," objective, implications of the Sacrament of the altar.

For whatever reason, the young Miłosz is unable to see this. When he does take up the teasing question of the Incarnation—in the 1937 poem "Wcielenie"—the paradox of Christ's dual nature will be expressed in a curious manner. God becomes man, and Miłosz sees Him as remaining so, as *needing* to remain so, in a fashion which again surprises in its devotion to matter, and in the novel moral content that flows from this.