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Larkin, Miłosz and the Pathos of Western Civilisation

I

Phillip Larkin and Czesław Miłosz have a lot more in common than the latter would care to admit. What divides them are different aesthetic rules they apply and different literary beliefs. However, the close reading of their texts may reveal meaningful similarities. Larkin's poem entitled "To the Sea" (1969), which opens the volume *High Windows* (1974), could be taken for a work by Miłosz as it would fit very well into Miłosz's mature and polyphonic poetics.

Echoing Walt Whitman's phrasing,[1] the poem is characterised by narration, metonymy and understated metaphors. The image built by employing synecdoche evokes the eye of the telescope whose movement from the particular to the whole and back functions as a symbol. The lines are similar in length; rhymes are inexact, slight, but artfully put together.

The poem presents a vision in which a memory and the current state of things are confronted. While analysing a particular sensual experience, it reflects upon identity and the hiatus of time. It offers contradictory suggestions: that of constancy and that of change. It can be understood as a mimetic attempt

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[1] "Catalogues which on other continents of poetry, in Walt Whitman for instance, could vouch for the opulence of the presented world, its ebullient richness and unrestrained vitality . . . , in Larkin attest to something quite contrary: to a lack of a subordinate organizing whole" (Jarniewicz, 2006: 111-112). Perhaps one should look for a different patron for Larkin's and Miłosz's enumerations within the English language tradition: William Wordsworth, who remains suspicious of the effects of his enumerations. For more on that, see Wiśniewski.

at preservation or as a symbolic creation. Both are subject to doubt which is expressed in the final lines and which brings to mind the mimetic and symbolic irony of Miłosz's volume *Świat: poema naiwne* (*The World: Naïve Poems*), as well as the lack of faith in language recurring in his later compositions.

Not unlike any modern-day literary work (or, to be more precise, not unlike every work in modern interpretation), Larkin's poetry draws attention to itself, from its origin and development to its figuration. His poem *To the Sea* bears witness to this. We find the recorded impression of the continuity of experience ("Still going on, all of it, still going on!") and at the same time we find the disillusionment with the inauthenticity of experience. There is evidence of a vacuum, a lacking, a break or unfamiliarity—reflections of a conscious convention ("Strange to it now," "It may be that through habit these do best, / Coming to the water clumsily undressed / Yearly; teaching their children by a sort / Of clowning; helping the old, too, as they ought.") In other words, we are dealing with both an experience of a whole unifying the self and the universe in a symbol, and a feeling of ritual emptiness, very characteristic of Larkin, which I would like to refer to as the experience of discontinuity. The former aims at stopping time; it tries to reduce time to space (a seaside beach), while the latter brings back time precisely because it breaks, creates a gap or a rift and, by doing so, it stresses the relation to what has been broken up. It sends us back in time, ceaselessly and unreliably.

These could be the author's simultaneous sensations or the feelings of the protagonist of the poem as programmed by the author (yet another favourite tricks of Larkin). We cannot determine which viewpoint should win: whether the sense of the poem lies in recording the experience of a whole or, to the contrary, losing the experience of a whole, losing any experience in general. Both scenarios are equally possible. In neither can we determine the relation of the self to presentational process or to the language: whether we are dealing with vision of the author's subconscious and his experience unified in his signature, or with a distanced creation of the protagonist. Lyricism and the irony of consciousness are both equally palatable.

All the layers of indefiniteness probably originate from yet another level, quasi-transcendental in relation to them: the level on which we decide whether to read the poem in a hermeneutical and symbolic way or as an allegory;

whether we shall look for the whole of experience and presentation, or accept the heterogony of literature.

If we attempt the former, we will find solemnity in this poem (a trait apparently uncharacteristic of Larkin), which slowly crescendos only to collapse suddenly. It only requires one step over the low wall to get to the promenade that both separates and connects land and sea. The author/protagonist, the reader and the poem, are facing the sea which surrounds the depicted reality. As we know, thanks to philosophers and our own direct experience, the view of the sea, be it rough or simply vast, can evoke in the observer the feeling of sensuous limitlessness and an urge to harness this limitlessness mentally. Since Larkin (just like Miłosz) is as far as possible from any attempt to elevate nature, the sea becomes nothing more than just the horizon, a borderline which, unlike the low wall, cannot be crossed.[2] Solemnity gradually builds through the presentation of those ordinary, human, encountered and comprehensible activities taking place on the beach, yet so close to the incomprehensible: the sea, the sand and the sky.

> Everything crowds under the low horizon:
> Steep beach, blue water, towels, red bathing caps,
> The small hushed waves' repeated fresh collapse
> Up the warm yellow sand, and further off
> …………………………............…
>
> To lie, eat, sleep in hearing of the surf
> (Ears to transistors, that sound tame enough
> Under the sky) . . .
> (Larkin, 1974: 9)

It is here that the solemn mood finds its culmination: adults leading children, children who would like to push wheelchairs of the elderly—thus human continuity is maintained, keeping dangerous nature at bay, as time stands still. As noted by Jerzy Jarniewicz, the white steamboat becomes the symbolic centre of the timeless symbol: "and further off / A white steamer stuck in the

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[2] Jacek Dehnel translates "To step over the low wall that divides" into Polish using a diminutive form (*murek*) of the word meaning wall (*mur*). The diminutive makes it even easier to step over it. See Larkin, 2008: 97.

afternoon—// Still going on, all of it, still going on!" (Jarniewicz, 2008: 114-115). This time Larkin, the master of enjambment generating heterology of meaning, distributes coordinated sentences (building blocks of the image and the awe of it) in between stanzas. Exceptionally though, the pause between them does not change the register or ruin the figuration but it reinforces the symbol. This could be the most perfect "eternal moment" of Miłosz.

The impression of the sublime increasing and subsiding is induced by narration, i.e. allegory. It does not necessarily mean the evolution or disillusionment of conscience as the figuration has its shortcomings which breaks up the flow of the poem and brings confusion among its many emotions. The poem does not create a uniformed self distinguishable from others; the signals of distance, closeness, solitude, participation and distinction are intermixed. Stepping over the low wall, one is here and there. Here the lyrical he is awestruck and there he participates; there he becomes disillusioned and here he doubts the ritual. He doubts the identity of the ritual and participation. He questions culture, that is: the unity of experience and communication; he resigns from lofty poetic symbols:

> . . . till the first
> Few families start the trek back to the cars.
> The white steamer has gone. Like breathed-on glass
> The sunlight has turned milky. If the worst
> Of flawless weather is our falling short,
> It may be that through habit these do best,
> Coming to the water clumsily undressed
> Yearly; teaching their children by a sort
> Of clowning; helping the old, too, as they ought.
> (Larkin, 1974: 10)

He doubts and invalidates culture and at the same time, conversely (since the change within the poem originates from narration and not from consciousness), he encounters the redeeming unity of experience and ritual.

I do not see indecision in Larkin's poetry. Instead, I see indefiniteness: a balance of timeless (i.e. extracting out of time) symbolism as unity of experience and the rift of unity between experience and language (which is contrary to the perseverance of symbols and is necessarily temporal)—the fall of the ritual. Not only does Larkin leave this ambiguity unsolved but he artfully keeps it

alive. Barańczak saw Larkin as the poet of sadness; to Miłosz, he was the poet of despair; Jarniewicz, in turn, considered him a skeptic. This last point of view seems the most adequate to me.

The equivocality noticed by Jarniewicz, upon which I am trying to expound here, does not originate in the irony of language. It results from a poetic decision. According to Jarniewicz, the author of *High Windows* employs the prosaic technique of creating a protagonist (usually more distant from the author than the lyrical self in a poem) thus making it less easy to pinpoint the intentions of the poet (2008: 136-155). The more general ambiguity gives rise to a derivative in the form of a non-self-sameness of voice which appears to cast a shadow on the possibility of efficient hermeneutics.

It was probably this non-self-sameness that deceived Miłosz, who reduced Larkin's intentions to despair while publically accusing him of nihilism. In all likelihood, Miłosz reduced the significance of Larkin's poetry to the unity of the lamenting voice. He castigated the despairing poet in the following words:

> I learned to live with my despair,
> And suddenly Philip Larkin's there,
> Explaining why all life is hateful.
> I don't see why I should be grateful.
> It's hard enough to draw a breath
> Without his hectoring about nothingness.
>
> My dear Larkin, I understand
> That death will not miss anyone.
> But this is not a decent theme
> For either an elegy or an ode.
> (Miłosz, 718)

In what we can hardly call a dialogue, Miłosz alludes to *Aubade*, a poem which appeared in *Tygodnik Powszechny* in the Polish translation by Stanisław Barańczak (see Larkin 2000) in the same year as Miłosz's volume *To* (*This*). Bitter words uttered by the protagonist of Larkin's poem, ambiguous and present throughoutthe poem, and transformed into an attitude/ a point of view/ an approach, could well have displeased Miłosz and triggered the repeated accusations of nihilism.

According to Jacek Dehnel, Larkin's translator and a poet strongly attached to Miłosz's poetic tradition, this attack could have resulted from a less

than thorough reading of Larkin. It could also have had to do with the desire to create a negative reference point.[3] Jarniewicz believes that both poets "belong to the same team, to [a group of] artists concerned with what becomes in their eyes a slow degeneracy of the spiritual bearings of the Western world." But Larkin does not concede sublimity, which has become the driving force in Miłosz's poetry (see Jarniewicz, 2001): "the dual language of the poem saves it from falling into the trap of pathos and sounding declarative" (Jarniewicz, 2006: 134).

II

Values are a question of reading, not of solemnity words. Drawing values cannot be brought down to the polysemy of a given word, because the communicative efficiency of solemnity word is one of the values, one connected to a special kind of relation between experience, aesthetics and language. The naturalism of the aesthetics of sublime communication is an effect of literary choices and the conviction that they are effective, as long as the poet and the reader keep

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[3] See the interview "Ten stary szelma, Larkin. Z Jackiem Dehnelem i Jerzym Jarniewiczem rozmawia Jakub Winiarski" ("Larkin, that old rascal. Jakub Winiarski talks with Jacek Dehnel and Jerzy Jarniewicz") published online on the website: http://biuroliterackie. pl/przystan/czytaj.php?site=240&co=txt_4219. The interview features, among others, the following statements by Dehnel: "It seems to me that Miłosz simply didn't read Larkin carefully. Although there might have been more to it: Larkin was created by Miłosz so that the latter could have a negative reference point for his concept of dutiful poetry, in which ethics complete aesthetics." "Mind you, while poets from Sidney to Shelley would defend poetry, Miłosz writes <against poetry>. But that's just anaside. When Miłosz uses the epithet 'funereal' [translator's note: present in the original but absent in translation by Miłosz and Hass], which is close to your 'gloom,' it is meant to discredit the poet. But in Larkin's case, categorising his poems in this way is simply wrong. It is hard to read Larkin without noticing his sense of humour, which can manifest itself even at the least expected moments, for example, in the first stanzas of the meditative 'Church Going.' Where will you find more tomfoolery? I am not saying there is no sadness in Larkin, but one cannot reduce his poetry to this one dimension, because Larkin's sadness (or more precisely: melancholy, as his feeling of loss is present in many of his poems) is completed by comedy, irony, absurdity, grotesque, tenderness, anger, which we can all find in his poems. I will say this in spite of what is usually said about Larkin: it is a poetry of a particularly wide amplitude. And if it is so, then I guess you have the answer to your question: why he is worth reading."

faith in the literary communion. Superficially, the accusation has to do with what Miłosz considers a nihilist approach (the belief that the sensual human life ends in an emptiness which takes away the point of all action). But, in fact, it concerns the communicative ambiguity resulting from the incompatibility of the poet's experience and the language of poetry.

Although Miłosz doubted the unity of designations and objects on multiple occasions, he firmly believed in the hermeneutics of meaning: in the word which is a unity in reading encompassing the incomprehensible experience and the poetic meaning. He would never settle for just acknowledging ambiguity and ceasing further reading, both traits Larkin specialised in. All inconsistencies in the latter's poetry have to be resolved to his disadvantage. Larkin challenges poetic reason and moral vitality. It seems to me that all reading done by the author of *The Land of Ulro* would require a comparative scrutiny for seeking out hidden accusations of inconsistency with the aesthetic ideology of the identity of the word. What deserves reconstruction even more urgently is the hermeneutics of his own works, which, for obvious reasons, became the dominant key to reading Miłosz. The sheer gravity of his vast and vibrant biography, rich in political and cultural connotations, exerts a pressure on the modern polyphony of his works, explored and exposed in different ways, especially those written in the period between the 1950s and the 1990s.

In the hermeneutic interpretation, the autobiographical self levels the differences in meaning resulting from the allegory of the lyrical self, and from many poetic protagonists. Such an interpretation of Miłosz's works: *The Captive Mind, A Poetical Treatise*, or *Where the Sun Rises and Where it Sets* can be justified on political, historical, religious or—precisely—biographical grounds. We need to remember, however, that in doing so we go above the heteronymous surface of the text which is built out of ambiguities bereft of any depth.

III

Solemn reading in model execution can be found in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, a canon for European modernity, interpreted in a convincing way by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1999). She points to the fact that the experience of solemnity (which is not insignificant as it is the only kind

which legitimately combines cognition and morality) is only accessible to the civilised man, who converts the experience of sensual infinity into a belief in supra-sensual control over the external and the experienced. In the aesthetic myth of modernity, primitive man, the barbarian, is not subject to solemn emotions as he lacks the necessary moral concepts. In this way, on the one hand, he is excluded from subjectivity which corresponds with communicable and communicating rationality and, on the other, he is an essential condition for the subjectivity of the civilised man, as a concept which upholds the culture vs. nature dualism. The subject capable of cognition and morality inevitably requires a hostage: an Other, an alien figure who is outside of culture and who does not possess the essential concept of free will. Aliens can be subjected to education (Kant) or be dubbed nihilists (Miłosz).

Seen from this perspective, the modern equivalent of the barbarian—Larkin the nihilist—can only despair (from the point of view of Miłosz's lyrical subject equipped with moral concepts) because he cannot control the presented solemnity and, like Kant's savage, resorts to fleeing at the sight of a precipice. The pathetic poetic "I" requires and creates an external immature not-I in order to consolidate its own identity. Familiarised with its own discontinuity, it constructs a communicative fiction of experience and language integration. The pathos of the hermeneutic formula of modern Western culture, represented by Miłosz's opinions incongruous with his own poetry, is the result of expecting or striving to reach efficient communication between moral concepts and cognition through art: an aesthetic identity relying on mutual translatability or the consonance of experience and language. Failing to meet these requirements can lead to being accused of nihilism or barbarism, as in the case of Larkin and his sustained ambiguity.

The purported nihilism is barbarism by choice, which is particularly dangerous for the civilised consciousness of Miłosz as it undermines the necessity of communication within culture as a whole. Moreover, it weakens the essential unity of this culture and suspends the necessity of communication as a vehicle for transferring concepts in general. It does not defy poetical sense but supports the post-Schillerian model of aesthetics as the harmony of concept, imagination and word.

It would appear that there are at least two main paths which modern interpretation can follow, and pointing to them is, of course, nothing groundbreaking. One of them is hermeneutics, which refers us to tradition and which assumes the unity of reason. The second is the equivocality of interpretation in which we cannot decide on one model of rationality. The origin of both is empirical, as both depart from experiencing the vastness of the sensual and social world, and both lead to doubting in the unity of designations and phenomena. While hermeneutical solemnity refers to the universal *logos* from whose domain barbarians and nihilists are excluded as their use of language is illegitimate, sceptical inconclusiveness fractures any solemn figuration, exposing the figurative structure of hermeneutics which appreciates an efficient translatability of life and literature. Instead, when embarking on reading, we must choose between them.

Trans. Anna Kruk

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Summary

This paper compares poetic strategies of Czesław Miłosz and Philip Larkin in the context of the sublime—category constitutive for the modern aesthetics. Kantian sublime implies the exclusion of cognitive and ethical subjectivity of the so-called wild man. According to Kant, "savage," as a non-entity incapable of the sublime, cannot experience world in an aesthetic way and, as a result, has no access to – mediated by the aesthetics—rationality of a civilized man. Miłosz's and Larkin's poetic strategies represent in a different way the modern lyrical pathos of subjectivity and meaning.

Key words: comparative literature, sublime, subject, Czesław Miłosz, Philip Larkin

Larkin i Miłosz wobec patosu zachodniej cywilizacji

Streszczenie

Artykuł porównuje strategie poetyckie Czesława Miłosza i Philipa Larkina w kontekście wzniosłości – kategorii konstytutywnej dla nowoczesnej estetyki. Wzniosłość w ujęciu Kanta zakłada wykluczenie tzw. dzikiego z poznawczej i etycznej podmiotowości. Według Kanta barbarzyńca, jako niezdolny do przeżywania wzniosłości, nie może doznawać świata na sposób estetyczny, a co za tym idzie, nie ma dostępu do zapośredniczonej estetycznie racjonalności cywilizowanego człowieka. Strategie poetyckie Miłosza i Larkina w różny sposób przedstawiają nowoczesny liryczny patos podmiotowości i znaczenia.

Słowa kluczowe: komparatystyka literacka, wzniosłość, podmiot, Czesław Miłosz, Philip Larkin