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Instead

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It would seem that all human beings should fall into each other's arms, crying out that they cannot live, but no cry escapes from their throat and the one thing they are more or less capable of doing is putting words on paper or paint on canvas, knowing full well that so called literature and art are instead of.¹

Czesław Miłosz. *Notatnik 1964–68*.

1.

In the poem dedicated to the memory of his dead wife, Orpheus obeys the prohibition of the gods of Hades.² He does not look back and attempt to talk to his beloved. Despite his obedience, he loses Eurydice: the path emerging from the Underworld is empty. While each departure from the original myth is significant, it does not change the function of the myth itself. Each version of the myth remains a myth – anthropologists, theologians, philosophers, and historians have written much on its function and meaning. What seems particularly important in Miłosz's rendering of the story, however, is a deep conviction accompanying the mythical idea of life that Ernst Cassirer describes as “that fundamental feeling...of the solidarity of life that bridges over the multiplicity and variety of its single forms” (82).³ Cassirer identifies it with “the feeling of indestructible unity of life,” one so strong that it “eclipses all

¹ Czesław Miłosz. *To Begin Where I Am*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. New York. 440.

² Miłosz. “Orpheus and Eurydice.” All further quotations from “Orpheus and Eurydice” and “Treatise on Theology” come from *Second Space: New Poems* (Ecco, 2005). All other quotations from Miłosz's poems come from: Miłosz. *New and Collected Poems*. (AW)

³ Ernst Cassirer. *Essay on Man: An Introduction to A Philosophy of Human Culture*. Yale University Press. 1962. 82.

those differences that, from our own point of view, seem to be unmistakable and inefaceable.” More so, he adds, it is a sense so “strong and unshakable as to deny and defy the fact of death.” Mythical thought in its entirety, he concludes, can be interpreted as an emphatic denial of “the very possibility of death” (83-4).⁴

In Miłosz’s tale, this mythical sense of solidarity of life is not as much questioned or doubted, as it is brought into view and revealed as a compensational activity performed through mythical repetition and is eventually futile. The hope of victory hidden in the layers of the mythical tale is vain. Miłosz appears to be suggesting, after Nietzsche, that what the tale (that is poetry, philosophy) gives us is an illusion: man invented art in order to be able to bear the burden of truth that is unbearable.

What is, thus, the essence of inversion performed by the author of “Orpheus and Eurydice”? Miłosz’s Orpheus resists the temptation to look at his love-object and obeys the command of the Underworld deities. What is the meaning of the forbidden gaze and of his obedience? The deeper we reach into the history of poetry, the more ambiguous the answer becomes: in the 20th century, the myth has become a philosophical parable, Orpheus himself – the eponym of the poet and the epitome of the adventure of poetry.⁵

His disobedience is a sign of hubris, in other words, a lack of moderation and respect one owes to gods. Orpheus, however, is more than a mere mortal, he is afforded the status of a demigod: his incantations have the power of creation, the power to intervene in the order of nature and things – an ability proper to supernatural beings. In the Orphic literary tradition, he is an archetypal poet and priest from the very beginning – *sacer interpretisque deorum*, as Horace designated him (Strauss 2).⁶ Orpheus’s speech is endowed with a wondrous gift: “Nothing can resist its force. *Carmina vel coelo possunt deducere lunam*” – songs even by the moon can be dragged down from heavens (Cassirer 110).⁷

His dual, liminal condition of being both human and divine subverts completely the order that has been set as natural, making him a figure of that which paradoxically situates him beyond good and evil, both elevating him and being the source of his misfortune. Orpheus’s actions are an act of transgression, as Lévinas observes in his essay on Blanchot’s Orphic study,⁸ an attempt to enter the space of Mystery, the

⁴ Cassirer, 83-84.

⁵ In *Descent and Return. The Orphic Theme in Modern Literature* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge–Massachusetts 1971) W.A. Strauss remarks on how in postmodernity the Orphic myth began to function as an interpretative metatext, a myth analyzing the myth (2). In *The Orphic Moment. Shaman to Poet- thinker in Plato, Nietzsche & Mallarmé* (State University of New York Press 1994) Robert McGahey (after Elizabeth Sewell) similarly reflects on contemporary Orphic poetry as “poetry thinking itself.” (xvi)

⁶ Strauss, *Descent*. 2.

⁷ Cassirer, *Essay*. 110.

⁸ Emanuel Levinas. *Spojrzenie poety* (“Le Regard du Poète”) transl. M.P. Markowski, “Literatura na swiecie” 1996 no. 10. 71 (All further references to Levinas are based on the Polish translations of his essay – AW)

matrix of being – to quote Paul de Man following Heidegger’s exegeses of Hölderlin as Orphic poet – a space where he not only speaks of Being, but says Being itself (256).⁹

Orpheus’s actions seem condemnable: they are a transgression violating the order of the realm of death, an attempt to bring back to life that which has already died and has been irreversibly torn from the order of human temporality. The border between the world of the dead and the world of the living is also clearly demarcated in Miłosz’s poem. Orpheus is not allowed to speak, nor to look at Eurydice in the realm of the dead. Language seems to belong to the same order as the forbidden gaze. It seems to be an action that has the same purpose. Name giving is an imitation of divine creation: in another poem Miłosz reflects “What is pronounced strengthens itself./ What is not pronounced tends to nonexistence” (2003 350). Language is thus something positive, although less powerful, than the gaze in its power to reach the object of adoration. One must ask: what is meaning of the gaze here and what is the obedience of the prohibition?

Both questions will be easier to answer set against the analysis of Orpheus’s gesture performed by Maurice Blanchot, Miłosz’s contemporary and a writer perfectly opposite to Miłosz. In Blanchot’s analysis of the Orphic myth, literature is viewed as an enterprise aiming to reclaim that which has been lost.¹⁰ Orpheus looks back and loses Eurydice: his gaze is supposed to confirm the existence of his beloved but instead, it kills her for a second time. Orpheus’s gaze annihilates, destroys, makes absent. The myth is, thus, an allegory of the failure of poetry in its attempts to recover that which has been lost. Orpheus’s descent underground symbolizes the attempts of the poet descending into the space that Blanchot calls the Night. In Orphic mythology, it is the space of death but also of primordial chaos from which the worlds of gods and humans emerge. It is presided over by Nyx, believed to be the mother of gods.¹¹ For the Romantics, for instance for Novalis, night is a space of mystery and a source of art accessible through dreams or madness seen as the night of the mind. In Mallarmé’s Orphic mythology, night is an energy field of language, a matrix of being (in Heidegger’s sense) – consequently, it is a space in which being reveals itself but also a kingdom of death and nothingness (that Mallarmé adores and calls “his Beatrice”¹²). In Blanchot’s essay, Eurydice is also referred to as the “Night,” personifying the hidden sense and inspiration, the space of mystery that the artist wishes to access. One could thus risk a proposition that for the modernist poets the gaze of Orpheus is a metaphor of a look into the mysterious matrix of meaning: it is what looking directly into God’s face is for the biblical tradition, a look into the face of mystery.

⁹ Paul de Man *Blindness and Insight*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1983. 256.

¹⁰ Maurice Blanchot. “The Gaze of Orpheus.” *The Space of Literature*. University of Nebraska Press, 1982.

¹¹ See also: A. Krokiewicz *Studia orfickie*. (Orphic Studies) Biblioteka “Meandra.” Warsaw, 1947, p. 41 and elsewhere, and R. McGahey *The Orphic Momenent*, xviii and elsewhere.

¹² McGahey, xvi-xvii and 119-121.

In Blanchot's essay "The Gaze," Eurydice is both a lost wife and a symbol of art. Eurydice is the furthest that art can reach. Under a name that hides her and a veil that covers her, she is the profoundly obscure point toward which art and desire, death and night, seem to tend. She is the instant when the essence of night approaches as the *other* night. (171) Blanchot's metaphors are challenging to interpret. They are, as Lévinas remarks, an attempt to move towards "expressing the inexpressible," to address the negativity of presentation (74-5).¹³ The understanding of otherness as the "eternal streaming of the outside," as something free of the mediation of our cognition, assumes the possibility of presentation free from the trap of objectification.

Staelman points out that Blanchot's reasoning is sustained by a paradox where separation is a form of bond, where distance is closeness and where absence is presence.¹⁴ But Orpheus himself is a paradox, too, a "gap, border and bridge" says McGahey in his reconstructions of the Orphic tradition in mythology and poetry. As an intermediary between gods and people, Orpheus is also an intermediary between the manic Dionysus and the mantic Apollo, between the free will and the subordination to the power of daimonion, between the doric and the phrygian order, brought back by Nietzsche at the end of the 19th century. He unites other contradictions as well: one between the human and the animalistic, the spiritual and the carnal. This contradictory condition, notes McGahey, is characteristic of shamans leading the rites that gave birth to the Greek tragedy: the "shaman's incantation (*epoidos*) becomes the tragedian's *oima*, which teaches the tribe – later the polis – how to move among conflicting demands in an existence that is basically tragic" (xv).¹⁵ McGahey believes that the contradictory condition of the shaman reveals itself in Orpheus's subsequent incarnations: we can find it in the legend of Orpheus on the Argos, in Empedocles and Heraclitus, in Plato who was a philosopher and an Orphic poet despite himself, and in Mallarmé, a poet-thinker, magician and alchemist, father of poetic modernity.

Blanchot's reasoning goes even further. In order to fully grasp its logic one needs to reconstruct his views on the essence of the literary presentation, on the possibility and task of literature. The author of *L'Espace littéraire* grounds his view in the belief that the necessity to present reality derives from the constant awareness of loss. For Blanchot, writing itself is kindred to the ultimate form of loss – death. Thus, death, or nothingness, becomes literature's hermeneutic circle. Writing has its origin in the sense of loss but also, paradoxically, fulfills itself positively in negativity. Writing fulfills itself in the conviction of inexpressability, in the constatation of failure that each attempt at literary representation ends up to be, mirroring the ultimate failure of the attempt to communicate the reality of death. Blanchot's formulation is even stronger. He assumes that death is not something given to us but something assigned and, as it was to Heidegger, it is the *telos* of the human being: each *Dasain* is its own

¹³ Lévinas. 74-5.

¹⁴ Richard Staelman, *Lost Beyond Telling. Representation of Death and Absence in Modern French Poetry*, Cornell University Press, 1990.

¹⁵ R. McGahey, xv.

tombstone one should live in a way that it allows one to engrave a worthy epitaph on it. Blanchot also believes death to be the *telos* of the literary text, or a space in which each act of writing inevitably fulfills itself or, more importantly, completes itself. The writer is nothingness at work, and death and nothingness are the “hope of language,” he says in his 1947 essay titled “Literature as the Right to Death” (336).¹⁶ Writing is an experience of the wondrous power of negativity in his metaphysic, it is death that is a figure of possibility and of the possible. Writing – alas! – language itself appears instead of reality, taking place of that which fundamentally no longer is: if reality, despite seeming obvious, was not a problematic presence, language and literature would be unnecessary. Writing is founded on the sense of lack of access to reality, it articulates absence the fullest expression of which is death. Writing is thus an embodiment of nothingness, even if secondary to the original and constituting its poor imitation – an embodiment of nothingness still. And it has, as death does, the power of negativity, it destroys what it represents.

Language is reassuring and disquieting at the same time...I say, "This woman," and she is immediately available to me, I push her away, I bring her close, she is everything I want her to be, she becomes the place in which the most surprising sort of transformations occur and actions unfold. We cannot do anything with an object that has no name...I say 'This woman.' Hölderlin, Mallarmé, and all poets whose theme is the essence of poetry have felt that the act of naming is disquieting and marvellous. A word may give me its meaning, but first it suppresses it. For me to be able to say, 'This woman,' I must somehow take her flesh-and-blood reality away from her, cause her to be absent, annihilate her. The word gives me the being, but it gives it to me deprived of being. The word is the absence of that being, its nothingness, what is left of it when it has lost being – the very fact that it does not exist. Considered in this light, speaking is a curious thing. (322)¹⁷

Thus, language appears instead of what “is.” Not only does it deprive things of their ontological reality, it also cannot retrieve the meaning of that which has been lost in the well of the past. It has no power to recover what it has made the object of its presentation by turning into an image or a metaphor. It builds constructions that supposedly refer to reality, puts itself instead of it and replaces the other presence, pushing it away into nonexistence. Talking about things and naming things equals wiping away, destroying the object of the utterance.

And, certainly, when I speak, I recognize very well that there is speech only because what “is” has disappeared in what names it, struck with death so as to become the reality of the name...Something was there that there is no longer. How can I find it again, how can I, in my speech, recapture this prior presence that I must exclude in order to speak? In order to speak it? And here we will evoke the eternal torment of our language when its longing turns back toward what it always misses, through the necessity under which it labors of being the lack of what it would say. (36)¹⁸

¹⁶ Blanchot. "Literature and the Right to Death." *The Work of Fire*. Stanford University Press, 1995. 336

¹⁷ Ibid. 322.

¹⁸ Blanchot. *The Infinite Conversation*. University of Minnesota Press. 1992.36

Stamelman says that Blanchot wants to “stay true” to this absence. Words denote not things but absence of things and this is why language assumes loss. This is why, if it wants to express absence that it signifies, it must turn to silence and lack itself (39).¹⁹ Writing is an act of furnishing the void, an act of disappearing. A paradoxical act, as it assumes negative fulfillment as its positive goal: it is meant to say nothing, express nothingness, articulate lack or absence, fulfill itself as an act of non-representation, and all that means giving up on its figurativeness.

Language, thus, according to Blanchot, is characterized by a tricky ambivalence: a power to annihilate and an illusion of bringing back. What appears in language, appears in it *instead* of reality. The word appears instead of the thing but the property that allows it to function instead, to create distance between the thing and its linguistic representation at the same time proves the existence of a relation between them. By making the thing absent, the word gives it meaning that can only be given to it by language. Something disappears from reality in order to appear in the text. Writing brings literature to life but pushes the world into nothingness because: “language can begin only with the void; no fullness, no certainty can ever speak... Negation is tied to language” (324).²⁰

Seen in this light also the speaking subject is subjected to negative transgression and alienation: it exists in separation from the real self, leading an alternate, shadow existence in the text. Situating itself in the text, it becomes its own other. The individual subject entrusts its existence to the impersonality of the language. Blanchot’s ontology of writing and literature found its continuation in the work of Roland Barthes: “to know that writing compensates for nothing, sublimates nothing, that it is precisely there where you are not,”²¹ says Barthes in *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*. For Blanchot, language does not articulate feelings, it does not express the personality of the writer, it does not represent his world: rather, it is an extension of the void into which the speaking “I” turns itself. It erases the subject from the text throwing it at the mercy of the linguistic self, of impersonal meanings that constitute themselves in word play. Elsewhere Barthes speaks of language as a room where all doors are locked, one cannot enter the language nor leave it. For Blanchot, it is an ontological threshold: the doors of language leading to existence also lead into the void. Language is thus founded on the sense of loss.

2.

Miłosz’s thought is diametrically different from Blanchot’s, even though, as a modern poet, he shares with the author of *LEspace littéraire* the awareness of the

¹⁹ Stamelman, 39.

²⁰ Blanchot, “Literature and the Right to Death.” 324.

²¹ Roland Barthes. *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*. Hill and Wang, 2010. 100. Earlier he notes: “Someone would have to teach me that one cannot write without burying ‘sincerity’” (that is, usurping the hope to access reality – MZ) and adds: “always the Orpheus myth: not to turn back.”

ontological break between language and reality. Miłosz, however, draws drastically different conclusions, and consequently, builds a different mythology of literature. To write that Miłosz removes himself from the Orphic mysticism that found its home in the modern poetry would not be enough: the author of *City Without a Name*, is reluctant, even hostile to it: at the World Poetry Conference (1967) he spoke of poetry as energy and of the mysterious complicity between energy, movement, mind, life, and health, insisting that poems – whether optimistic or pessimistic – are always written “against death” (346).²² From *Three Winters* onward, he always situates his poetry on the side of life, light, and movement, fervently praising existence. His idea of literature is thus directly the opposite of Blanchot’s vision marked by negativity. If Blanchot sees transgression taking place on paper to be the goal and nourishment of literature: from existence to nonexistence, Miłosz argues the contrary, as that which is not pronounced, tends to nonexistence.

He declares himself to be a poet of “is” – in all senses of the word, from the physical to the metaphysical one, always siding with what is referred to today as the “metaphysics of presence.” This is what happens also in his Orphic poem. Orpheus attempts to sway Persephone and the gods of Underworld by singing the beauty of the world, and perceives his affirmation of being and existence as his poetic achievement.

He sang the brightness of mornings and green rivers,
He sang of smoking water in the rose-colored daybreaks,
Of colors: cinnabar, carmine, burnt sienna, blue,
Of the delight of swimming in the sea under marble cliffs,
Of feasting on a terrace above the tumult of a fishing port,
Of tastes of wine, olive oil, almonds, mustard, salt.
Of the flight of the swallow, the falcon,
Of a dignified flock of pelicans above the bay,
Of the scent of an armful of lilacs in summer rain,
Of his having composed his words always against death
And of having made no rhyme in praise of nothingness. (2005 100)

In Miłosz’s poem, Orpheus’s song reverberates against its traditional readings. Beginning with Virgil and Ovid, Orpheus’s song is a tale of pain after loss, a lament after the dead beloved, a lover’s complaint against the cruelty of fate and an attempt to enchant it through a mournful incantation. When Orpheus sings one could think that the “world of grief arose,” as Rilke tells us. This time, however, Orpheus’s song praises life and its wonders. It remains in discord with the poetic tradition but not necessarily with Orphic mythology. Yearning after death found in the archaic Orphic literature and echoing the Minoan metaphysics, is adjacent to a praise of life clearly present in the later Orphic hymns from the 3rd century and in the writing of Neoplatonists who viewed Orphism as a source of their philosophy.²³

²² Miłosz at *Rencontre Mondiale de poésie (World Poetry Conference)*, Montreal, September 1967. In: *Zaczynając od moich ulic*, Paris, 1985, 346.

²³ Krokiewicz, 23 and 35-36.

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Miłosz's praise of love is Orphic as well. From the Orphics to Plato and his doctrine of Eros, love was seen not only as a fulfillment of an erotic desire, and a manifestation of sexuality, but also as a unity of souls whose "emotional wisdom is more perfect than the purely intellectual and egoistical individual wisdom." It is love that allows man to "transform from a cripple, an alienated piece of reality, into a whole created with another man, more perfect than each of them is separately, it is love that creates a sense of fundamental connection to the rest of the universe, a sense of entering the path to true happiness and freedom as man throws away the yoke of individual poverty and enriches his own self with the other self that is gifted to him" (59).²⁴ This is the understanding of love in Miłosz's "Orpheus and Eurydice."

He remembered her words: "You are a good man."
He did not quite believe it. Lyric poets
Usually have – as he knew – cold hearts.
It is like a medical condition. Perfection in art
Is given in exchange for such an affliction.

Only her love warmed him, humanized him.
When he was with her, he thought differently about himself.
He could not fail her now, when she was dead. (2005 99)

The Orphic and Neoplatonic elements of the tradition that Miłosz embraced studying the writings of gnostics, Fathers of the Church, and exegetes of Scripture, resound in his poem but not only there. And those pointed out so far are by no means a complete list. In fact, all of the important Orphic ideas echo through Miłosz's writing. The idea of connection between the whole and the multiple is one of the key assumptions of Orphism: the Orphics believed that multiplicity emerges from the whole but also returns to it and therefore all things are one. This is symbolized by Zagreus-Dionysus, torn to pieces by Titans and reborn from the heart, representing a whole forced against its will to turn into multiplicity and later returning to the original state.

Zagreus exists doubly after being torn apart and burnt to ashes by the Titans, first as one person, Dionysus, born from his heart, and second, as the multiplicity of all human souls (symbolized by the innumerable particles of ash) that has to be purified of the murderous Titanic impulses and therefore enter various human, animal and plant bodies until they reach the salvation of apotheosis or are condemned to eternal punishment in Tartarus: "For before now I have been at some time boy and girl, bush, bird, and a mute fish in the sea" writes Empedocles. (50, 81)²⁵

Vision of the world as a great cosmic transformation found Miłosz's early volume, *Three Winters*, is complemented by the concept of *apokatastasis* (the idea of reconstitution or restitution of the lost original condition, and eventually of unity) present in his writing from the 70s onwards. Correspondingly, the idea of the pilgrimage of souls is reflected in the imaginary and phantasmagoric stagings of the speaking voices and in

²⁴ Ibidem 59.

²⁵ Krokiewicz, 50 and 81.

the desire for multiple incarnations: “I would be everything/ Perhaps even a butterfly of a thrush, by magic” (2003 164). “I was wearing plumes, silks, ruffles and armor/ Women’s dresses, I was licking the rouge./ I was hovering at each flower from the day of creation/ I knocked on the closed doors of the beaver’s halls and the mole’s” (2003 193).

Similar observations can be made regarding Miłosz’s concept of life after death and immortality. Here, however, poetic Orphic mythology seems to function in a very particular manner: no longer belonging to the private museum of images it becomes something more than element of living tradition. It acquires a religious dimension but – importantly – in his other poems, not in “Orpheus and Eurydice”! In “Orpheus and Eurydice” it is distorted, negated, and abandoned, which only adds to the poem’s importance and places it among those works that reveal choices and decisions fundamental to Miłosz and his philosophy of literature. Its exceptional character is thus of fundamental importance also to us. How are we to understand the will to continue and the act of rebellion?

In the Orphic belief, those chosen by gods, following the life on earth and the release from the cycle of eternal lives, will live on the fortunate islands experiencing eternal bliss. For them, life after death will be a continuation of earthly life but without its suffering and afflictions. The conviction that the other world is same as this one (“same” is to be understood as an affirmation of life’s beauty and sweetness – otherwise one should probably doubt the idea of divine goodness and love of creation) returns often in Miłosz’s writing. Ancient Greeks, however, had a different eschatological vision: in Homer, souls of the dead “lead an insufferably empty and artificial existence of quite unnecessary underworld shadows” and their “immortal soul is that part of man which is worse and inferior to the mortal body” (78, 56).²⁶ As such, to use Krokiewicz’s formulation, “hopelessly gray eschatology” appears also in Miłosz’s poem; earlier, in “On Parting with My Wife, Janina” and “Treatise on Theology,” we will find doubt about the idea of resurrection and immortality of the soul. One cannot, however, ascribe atheism to the “gray eschatology” of Miłosz’s poem: despair resulting from the thought that the Orphic-Christian longing may be nothing more than a great illusion is a negative proof of the existence of the object of faith. It is precisely its impossible presence that becomes the only true reality in “Orpheus and Eurydice.”

Under his faith a doubt sprang up
And entwined him like cold bindweed.
Unable to weep, he wept at the loss
Of the human hope for the resurrection of the dead,
Because he was, now, like every other mortal.
His lyre was silent, yet he dreamed, defenseless.
He knew he must have faith and he could not have faith. (2005 101)

Miłosz puts at stake something that lies at the very center of his philosophical anthropology, something that for many years has been the cornerstone of his poetic

²⁶ Krokiewicz, 78 and 56.

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construction. For decades it relied on Pascal's conviction that faith is mankind's inherent necessity, a necessity of the source of sense. Pascal's metaphysical wager was an act of mind agreeing to an act of faith: faith that the world, as Descartes deduced earlier, is constituted in the gaze of God. It is what guarantees its continuation and our sense of reality. Therefore, to look means to give sense and to confirm existence. This very question returns in Miłosz's work in several forms. He considers it in "Treatise on Theology":

Why theology? Because the first must be first.

And first is a notion of truth. It is poetry, precisely,
With its behavior of a bird thrashing against the transparency
Of a windowpane that testifies to the fact
That we don't know how to live in a phantasmagoria.

Let reality return to our speech.

That is, meaning. Impossible without an absolute point of reference. (2005 47)

It is an omnipresent assumption in Miłosz's writing. If Blanchot believes literary work to be guaranteed by the inexpressible "nothing" in the streaming of speech external to the subject, Miłosz sees it as guaranteed by (divine) Presence. His philosophical conservatism does not make him anachronistic. Seemingly old-fashioned in his attitudes, Miłosz nonetheless finds himself at the center of the debate about the possibilities of language as a medium to present reality: Taylor, for instance, writes about religiously motivated gaze (in other words, the instance of *mimesis* necessary for the poet and replicating God's constitutive and confirming gaze) as a condition for a 20th century epiphany.²⁷

Miłosz believes that poetic "seeing" has a founding power: linguistic representations and metaphors have energy that strengthens things in their existence, captures them and saves that which "is." But is language also capable of expressing death and absence? It is capable of so much after all: in its potentiality, unveiling the chance to define its ontological status, it allows us to touch that which our intelligence cannot embrace. In "Treatise on Theology" we read: "There is only our ecstatic dance, a diminutive part of a great totality" (2005 59).

This vibrating great totality, the potentiality that is the matrix of being, embodied by the Orphic Nyx/Night, does not find its apotheosis in Miłosz the same way it did in Mallarmé. It is not viewed as seductive nothingness, singing mystery, beckoning abyss. But both from the perspective outlined in "Orpheus and Eurydice," and for Miłosz himself, the words of "Treatise" about the "farewell to the decadence/ Into which the language of poetry in my age has fallen" reveal themselves not to be the last... Can its teaching be that there is nothing else on the other side? The barrier between "here" and "there" is insurmountable. Poetic journeys to hell are futile, there is no reason to look into the abyss in the hope of bringing back that which has been lost. When we find ourselves on the threshold, in the state of loss, when – as

²⁷ Charles Taylor. *Źródła podmiotowości*, Warsaw, 2001. 824 and elsewhere.

Miłosz's Orpheus – we find ourselves “Nowhere,” the words from “this side,” words that ensure the world's creation and confirm its existence, lose their magical power and our faith reveals itself as an illusion, a consolation that may bring relief here but is powerless there. “

Because he was, now, like every other mortal/
His lyre was silent, yet he dreamed, defenseless” (2005 101).

On the other hand, mythologies are futile. They all originate – Miłosz evades the question about the transcendental source of sense as something “incomprehensible to us” – from this world (83).²⁸ Miłosz never doubts the primacy of what “is” above that which is only the object of our longing, even of our religious longing. He has already denounced Orpheus's gaze before. It was not easy: his fascination with Robinson Jeffers, a supremely Orphic poet, despite the fact that Miłosz did not focus on the Orphic element in the work of the Californian poet, left permanent marks on his own poetry. His adventure with Jeffers's poems forced him to address his own questions as well.

He was not indifferent to the Orphic element in Jeffers, especially to the pursuit of the pantheistically defined unity, although – as I have mentioned – he spoke about it without referencing Orphism. In the conclusion of his essay on Jeffers he remarks:

It should be clear at this point that I am viewing poetry as an appendage of religion (an exact opposite of poetry seen as religion), religion in the broad sense (regardless whether it is derived from *religare*, to bind), but the desired unity can be theistic or atheistic. The muscles and nerves of the mind shine through the word “religion” and it is thus better than “Weltanschauung.” Poetry that avoids the participation in the basic human unifying attempt, turns into trifle and dies. However, this is not Jeffers's poetry and I approach it with due seriousness. (259)²⁹

Speaking of the Orphic elements, one more parallel should not escape our attention as it testifies to the kinship of the linguistic imagination of the modern poet and the archaic mythology. Miłosz says that poetry is servant to religion and that “muscles and nerves... of the mind shine through the word ‘religion...’”. The frequent presence of carnal tropes in Miłosz's thinking is not neutral in the Orphic context. Orpheus mediates in himself the human and the animalistic but his lyre, too, unites two opposite orders: that of nature and culture. Producing the song, it produces metaphors of the primordial next to the metaphors of harmony and order. Elizabeth Sewell points to Bacon's commentary in *De Sapientia Veterum* on Orpheus's history as a metaphor of philosophy that he himself personifies, and to a sentence from Shakespeare about the strings of Orpheus's lute “strung with poets' sinews” (III.2).³⁰ Orpheus's body is his instrument and he himself (and his history) is the

²⁸ Miłosz *Metafizyczna pauza*. (Metaphysical Pause) 83.

²⁹ Miłosz, *Ogród nauk*. 259.

³⁰ E. Sewell, *The Orphic Voice*, New Haven, Yale University Press 1960. 58. Compare: W. Shakespeare. *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Act III: Scene 2.

embodiment (*epitome*) of philosophy. Miłosz never doubted the connection between poetry and philosophy. He often declared himself to be, for instance in the poem “In Milan”, “a poet of the five senses” (2003 170). He spoke intriguingly of future poetry in which “the rhythm of the body will be in it, heartbeat, pulse, sweating, menstrual flow, the gluiness of sperm, the squatting position at urinating, the movements of the intestines, together with the sublime needs of the spirit, and our duality will find its form in it, without renouncing one zone or the other” (33).³¹ Elsewhere he writes about the need to “start with the body” as the pantheistic view of God – that he finds himself embracing – identifies God “with the rhythm of blood,” finds him “in the gut, muscle, in tasting oneself that is like a cat stretching” (84).³²

But the desired unity of mind/soul and body is a space of mystery and paradox, an aporia, a space of incongruence and tensions disintegrating it from the inside – as is the space of the mythical tale, *coincidentia oppositorum* of Nicholas of Cusa, Hegelian *Aufhebung* and the space of a Mallarméan text, an associative volatility of language, vibration of sense, constant oscillation and dissemination of meanings. As is the Orphic moment, encounter with the Night. This unity is constantly exposed and vulnerable to the necessary tearing apart, like Orpheus’s body.

The poet cannot feed on this time of the world
Until he has torn it to pieces,
and himself also

– says Jeffers, whom Miłosz translated.³³ The mythical tale of the world, told by the body of the teller, like Orpheus’s tale (Orphic legends recount that long after the poet’s death his head continued to speak prophesies) heals in the centuries of poetic language, in the language of tropes among which metaphor is the most crucial as a figure of identity and identicalness of different elements.

This longing for unity that Miłosz shares with Jeffers did not erase his objections to the metaphysics of the American poet. Our humanity is like a cathedral suspended “in an abyss, filled with the anguish of transient organisms passing without a trace” (87).³⁴ But without our gaze the other, the abyss, though real, does not exist, devoid of meaning. In “A Philosopher’s Home” Miłosz declares “*esse est percipi*” – to be means to be perceived (2003 573). One more factor may come into play here: an absolutization of the poetic gaze, serving the religion of poetry that Miłosz, as I have pointed out earlier, refuses to be a priest of. There are many writers and poets who worship the Work, the mythical Book, enthusing about the act creation competing with the created. Miłosz was never one of them, always wanting to be the poet of that which *is*.

The gaze of Orpheus, writes Lévinas, goes beyond the metaphysics of *esse percipi*: literature “opens us to the unthinkable.” In other words, it enters into the

³¹ Miłosz, *Unattainable Earth*. Ecco, 1986. 33.

³² Miłosz, *Metafizyczna pauza* (Metaphysical Pause). 84.

³³ Robinson Jeffers. “Tear Life to Pieces.”

³⁴ Miłosz, *Metafizyczna pauza*. (Metaphysical Pause) 87.

“eternal streaming of the outside,” into that which is beyond the horizon of our perception. The gaze of Orpheus is thus something different from the contemplative gaze, it is its radicalization because it wants to avoid the distance that is proper to contemplation, distance which – although it allows for the abandonment of the “I” and to unite with the perceived – is still a trace of presence and supremacy of “I,” making the gaze an act of *our* will, leaving to us the autonomy of the “I” and to the horizon of our world (72, 75).³⁵ Miłosz, too, while praising sight above all other senses, sees the fundamental importance of the gaze as the gaze not only establishes the relation, but also constitutes it in a way more perfect than literary representation is capable of. The desire “to see, purely and simply, without name/ Without expectations, fears, or hopes / At the edge where there is no I or not-I” is precisely a desire for the kind of relation in which the mediation of language is eliminated, along with the deficiencies of verbal and graphic articulation that delay and blur the essence of contact (2003 460). Seeing is an act of direct communication, realization of the deictic function; it constitutes the presence of the object as a gesture of pointing does, unclouded by the always unreliable and imperfect mediation of the language.

Can this gaze be free from its objectifying aspect? Never completely! One can try to avoid the mediation of the subject: depersonalized lyric resulting from the Mallarméan revolution shows that it is possible, at the cost of representational function of literature, proving thereby that the perspective of the subject is necessary for representation. One cannot, however, avoid the mediation of language. It cannot be avoided even in the Mallarmé’s and Blanchot’s approach in which the being of things is not named in the work but speaks itself in it, despite the fact that in this perspective the “I” vanishes and being equals speaking in impersonal speech, in the Self of the language (72-3).³⁶ No attempt at representation can be rid of “I” and tear the veil of language covering the barest reality. But an awareness of this difficulty, and in particular, the knowledge that it is language that “upholds” our reality, inspires distrust towards our attempts at representation, arousing suspicion towards one’s own poetic endeavor, towards “being a poet” and most of all, towards our own presentations.³⁷ It reminds that they are usurpations and that – as representations of reality – they are always already *ex post* and incomplete, blurring and distorting the object of presentation. Already Blanchot spoke of this particular aspect of literary auto-presentation: “I say my name, and it is as though I were chanting my own dirge: I separate myself from myself, I am no longer either presence or my reality, but an objective, impersonal presence, the presence of my name, which goes beyond me and whose stonelike immobility performs exactly the same function for me as a tombstone weighing on the void”

³⁵ Lévinas, 72, 75.

³⁶ Lévinas, 72-73.

³⁷ This motivation of Miłosz’s distrust towards his autobiographical project is discussed by Krzysztof Kłosiński in “Wymyka mi się moja ledwo odczuta esencja,” Kłosiński, *Poezja żalu*. Katowice, 2001. 118-143.

(324).³⁸ In “The Gaze of Orpheus,” he says of Orpheus, “the song immediately makes him ‘infinitely dead’” (173).³⁹

Literature, even when it wishes to rid itself of the demands of “I” and represent the world, always reveals itself as a form of auto-presentation and auto-interpretation, always unreliable and incomplete. Writing becomes an attempt to give unity to that which is internally contradictory, an attempt to order that which cannot be ordered. It is an attempt to give integral character to a non-integral Self that is non-integral because it is non-transparent to itself and unaware of the entirety of its psychological processes. Literature of the Orphic tradition, whether by Blanchot or by Miłosz, aware that all unity is transient – as it is only a figure of language in which sense never becomes ultimate sense – adds that this auto-presentation is a perpetual process.

All that remains, then, is to become a hunter, forever chasing the unrepresentable, the inexpressible, to love – like Robinson Jeffers loved the wild swan of the world – without the promise of ever being able to see reality’s true visage, to meet it face to face. This is why we must be distrustful of everything in our representation that “is set in the brocade of style” (2003 228).

What is found in poetic representation, is always *instead* of reality. “Orpheus and Eurydice” puts an end to the hope pervading Miłosz’s work, the hope of resurrection of what was in the word. Miłosz’s word wants to be hymnal, it wants to praise what “is” and it wants a resurrection of that which was.

3.

The desire to tear through to reality, the hope to cross over the breach, to solve the antinomy between language and reality that evades it, is what drives literature today more than ever, and – as a philosophical question – finds itself again at the heart of writing. The necessity to make present, especially to make present that which had been lost is what sustains and justifies literature. Would literature be necessary if we were in a perfect unity with that which *is*, if we had perfect insight into the nature of things and if things and events did not pass, if memory was a force at least equal to our imagination, if our impressions and feelings retained their intensity forever? Writing literature would be an unnecessary task, *otium negotiosum*, as it was for our ancestors, even though it was more than just this for them as well. It has been more than just this since Orpheus descended into the Underworld and his story became a topos of elegiac poetry.

But can absence and lack find representation through anything else than an illusory and incomplete form of figuration? Figuration that always discredits and falsifies the original because to represent absence is an impossibility, a contradiction in itself and a performative paradox? “We don’t reply for we have no language,

³⁸ Blanchot, “Literature as the Right to Death,” 324.

³⁹ Blanchot, “The Gaze of Orpheus,” 173.

in which to talk with the living. And the flowers wilt, useless, laid when we were already far,” says Miłosz in one of his last poems (309).⁴⁰

Literature is one of those rituals that uphold the world in its existence. But Miłosz’s Orpheus knows about the futility of the ritual outside the world of the living. He keeps his promise: he will not look at Eurydice, he will not try to address her. He will not look because he knows that his gaze is a double gaze: of the man who loves and suffers and of the man who writes of love and suffering. It is also the gaze of a magician, a trickster, a brave who wants to tear the veil and outsmart fate. His gaze would place him in the mythical order, but it would kill his beloved for a second time. Once so obviously present, she is now beyond language, escaping that which remains in the presentation. In the presentation she is always a shadow, she refers to something beyond the image, to something “other” than what the image contains, something that she resembles but is not. She is thus a sign of something that is absent from presentation and this poignant fact makes loss – rather than her – the object of presentation. What has been lost is absent and appears as a figuration of “something other,” of lack and emptiness. “Her face no longer hers, utterly gray.”

In his refusal to look, Miłosz’s Orpheus betrays the condition of the poet and the poet’s calling. Departing from the traditional version of the myth, he manifests his disagreement: he waits for a miracle, for a different, happy ending, a triumph of life over death, an epiphany of presence. But the miracle does not happen.

Day was breaking. Shapes of rock loomed up
Under the luminous eye of the exit from underground.
It happened as he expected. He turned his head
And behind him on the path was no one.

Sun. And sky. And in the sky white clouds.
Only now everything cried to him: Eurydice!
How will I live without you, my consoling one!
But there was a fragrant scent of herbs, the low humming of bees,
And he fell asleep with his cheek on the sun-warmed earth.

Writing is an act of giving sense, it upholds *our* world in its existence. But the dream of poetry as a tool of magic, a religious ritual capable of moving the Sun and stars, of changing the world and resulting in the triumph of life above death – Orphic poetry’s dream of a causative language that participates in the presence is only a poetic mythology. “Poetry makes nothing happen” remarked W.H. Auden, who found himself on the antipodes of Orphism and was as important to Miłosz at one point as Jeffers. But – an Orphic might say today – every poem is performative, since the state of things that the poem can be referred to does not exist before it. Poetic utterance has no other reference than itself, no other reference than the will to say of the chanting authorial voice. More so: it is a guarantee of reality, it is in the poetic text that being reveals itself.

⁴⁰ Miłosz, “What do I.” Selected and Last Poems. 1931-2004. Ecco, 2011. 309.

If seeing and cognition – writes Lévinas – are an act of taking over their object, of mastering it from a safe distance, then the remarkable reversal that occurs in writing allows us to be touched by what we see, touched from a distance. Literary work takes over the gaze, words look at the one who writes (this is how Blanchot defines fascination.) Poetic language that pushed away the world, allows the incessant murmur of this distance to reemerge... it is a never-ending murmur of being that the literary work allows to reverberate. (73)⁴¹

This new mythology, as hermetic as the Orphic teachings were once, equips the writer with the will of writing, it makes Orpheus look into the well of the abyss, face his own text and disappear in it. But the poem can never compensate for the loss – it is at most a work of mourning which, as we have learned from Feud, always serves life. Is it a figure of consolation then? Things are not that simple. For the author of “Orpheus and Eurydice” writing includes a consolatory function but also the lie of poetry, the immorality of art, the contradiction that removes it from the moral judgment, beyond the world placed between good and evil. It is a recurrent theme in Miłosz’s thought⁴².

As a *daimon* mediating between the contradictory orders of being, Orpheus unites the old and the new. His descent into the realm of death and his return has been traditionally, since Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, viewed as a figure of transformation and renewal. This time his *katabasis* – his journey to Hell – happens in modern scenery, characteristic of our age that for Miłosz is also a continuation Baudelaire’s *cité infernale*, a modern desacralized space devoid of the promise of sense. The image of Orpheus falling asleep “with his cheek on the sun-warmed earth” is a metaphor of consolation: dream can be a figure of live-giving oblivion, of rest and respite, after which memory returns with new force, recovering – through repetition – the image of the beloved. In other words, recovering that which can be recovered. But this poetic image is also a figure of unity, lost and recovered, of an alliance with being in its entirety, a metaphor of agreement to existence.

Is it because such agreement is at the same time an affirmation of the mystery of being? In his poem, Miłosz still equals being with good. He repeats after St Thomas Aquinas: “it is good because it is.” But old categories and notions, although important, receive new interpretations. “Is”, word that Nietzsche believed to be crucial for the European metaphysics, is given explication. For Nicholas of Cusa, Neoplatonist, what “is” exists as *coincidentia oppositorum*. Referring to Cassirer, Strauss writes that the dynamic of this dialectic retains constant, polar tensions between *explicatio* and *complicatio*, between *alteritas* and *unitas*. The only truth, one beyond comprehension in its final sense can only be presented and accessed through the mediation of the other but all that is other tends towards unity and participates in it (16).⁴³ Nicholas of Cusa believes contradiction to find its positive resolution in God. This is viewed differently by the poets of the “linguistic turn,” such as Mallarmé, who identify

⁴¹ Lévinas, *Spojrzenie poety*, s. 73.

⁴² See: *Niemoralność sztuki*. (Immorality of Art.) *Ogród nauk*. Paris, 1979. 161 and elsewhere.

⁴³ Strauss, *Descend and Return*. 16.

the borders of our world with the borders of our language. In Mallarmé, *nothingness* means universe from which God is absent (89).⁴⁴ For Blanchot, negation is the moving force that holds the reality of things in suspension (253).⁴⁵ In the writing of Mallarmé, Rilke and Blanchot, *coincidentia oppositorum*, believed to be the principle of being, became a vibrating void, an aporia that is the matrix of sense. And, as I have said in “Miłosz – poeta powtórzenia” (Miłosz, a poet of repetition) to one who is lead by invisible hands, “is” has a completely new interpretation, one typical of post–Heideggerian philosophy.⁴⁶ As we have seen, an interpretation not differing much from the one found in the writing of modern Orphics.

Translation: Anna Warso

⁴⁴ Ibidem. 89.

⁴⁵ Blanchot in Strauss, *Descend and Return*. 253.

⁴⁶ “Miłosz, poeta powtórzenia.” *Teksty Drugie*. 2001. Vol. 4/5.