

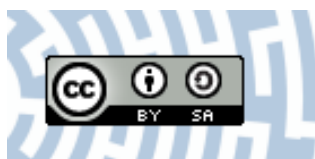


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## CAMPO DI FIORI, OR WALLS

When Czesław Miłosz wrote his “Campo di Fiori” in Warsaw in 1943, he must have known that “human nature” (however we define it) is most resistant to change:

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W Rzymie na Campo di Fiori  
Kosze oliwek i cytryn,  
Bruk opryskany winem  
I odłamkami kwiatów.  
Różowe owoce morza  
Sypią na stoły przekupnie,  
Naręcza ciemnych winogron  
Padają na puch brzoskwini.

In Rome, on Campo dei Fiori,  
baskets of olives and lemons  
cobblestones spattered with wine  
and the wreckage of flowers.  
Vendors cover the trestles  
with rose-pink fish;  
armfuls of dark grapes  
heaped on peach-down.

Tu na tym właśnie placu  
Spalono Giordana Bruna,  
Kat płomień stosu zażegnał  
W kole ciekawej gawiedzi.  
A ledwo płomień przygasnął,  
Znow pełne były tawerny,  
Kosze oliwek i cytryn  
Nieśli przekupnie na głowach.

On this same square  
they burned Giordano Bruno.  
Henchmen kindled the pyre  
close-pressed by the mob.  
Before the flames had died  
the taverns were full again,  
baskets of olives and lemons  
again on the vendors' shoulders.

Life goes on, and things go back to normal: excitement, even if evoked by the suffering of a thinker, whose courage in questioning the dogmatics of the Roman Catholic church for the good of all those oppressed by it would not gain any support from those less courageous, will always die down. Awe, sympathy, glee, horror, or anger always eventually yield to what most of us, ordinary bread-eaters, value most: our “small stability,” our own little peace. The cobbles, once spattered with the blood of the hapless convict, soon provide the riverbed for accidentally spilt wine; the “wreckage of flowers” readily replaces the broken remains of what used to be a human being, lost among the smoldering embers of the pyre. *Nihil novi*.

Wspomniałem Campo di Fiori  
W Warszawie przy karuzeli,  
W pogodny wieczór wiosenny,  
Przy dźwiękach skocznej muzyki,  
Salwy za murem getta  
Głuszyła skoczna melodia  
I wzlatywały pary  
Wysoko w pogodne niebo.

Czasem wiatr z domów płonących  
Przynosił czarne latawce,  
Łapali płatki w powietrzu  
Jadący na karuzeli.  
Rozwiewał suknie dziewczynom  
Ten wiatr od domów płonących,  
Śmiały się tłumy wesołe  
W czas pięknej warszawskiej niedzieli.

I thought of Campo dei Fiori  
in Warsaw by the sky-carrousel  
one clear spring evening  
to the strains of a carnival tune.  
The bright melody drowned  
the salvos from the ghetto wall,  
and couples were flying  
high in the blue sky.

At times wind from the burning  
would drift dark kites along  
and riders on the carrousel  
caught petals in midair.  
That same hot wind  
blew open the skirts of the girls  
and the crowds were laughing  
on the beautiful Warsaw Sunday.

Little has changed between February 17<sup>th</sup>, 1600, and the Palm Sunday of April 19<sup>th</sup>, 1943. The metallic rattle of machine guns and thundering explosions—the obvious sounds of the desperate, almost month-long battle against the Nazi terror in the Warsaw ghetto—doubtlessly reach the rest of the city, which remains oblivious to the ongoing drama. The tall wall, separating the “small stability” of those who have (mis)lead themselves into believing that whatever happens behind the (artificial) divide is none of their business, from the tragedy of those whose choice is limited to death by the bullet in one last effort to retain their human dignity, or death by Zyklon B in the gas chambers of Auschwitz, is not impenetrable. People *know*: flying high, spinning on a tall merry-go-round, right above their heads they *do see* the “dark kites” of smoke from invisible, but raging, fires; black petals of soot could not be mistaken for flowers. And it is only when the misery strikes them directly, when suffering affects their families, that they will choose to act, expecting the world to see their struggle as its own. (S)laughter: the paranoid reality of the mad carrousel of indifference.

Morał ktoś może wyczyta,  
Że lud warszawski czy rzymski  
Handluje, bawi się, kocha  
Mijając męczeńskie stopy.  
Inny ktoś morał wyczyta  
O rzeczy ludzkich mijaniu,  
O zapomnieniu, co rośnie,  
Nim jeszcze płomień przygasnął.

Someone will read a moral  
that the people of Rome and Warsaw  
haggle, laugh, make love  
as they pass by martyrs' pyres.  
Someone else will read  
of the passing of things human,  
of the oblivion  
born before the flames have died.

Passing moral judgments or philosophizing over a glass of wine by the fireplace is such a nice pastime: we enjoy feeling righteous and, if there is no superball on TV, we even will take part in a public demonstration (carefully avoiding the crowd control units) to post selfies on our Facebook walls to validate our “heroic story.” But it is precisely the Facebook wall that separates us—petty, self-righteous “heroes”—from those who pay the price of their heroism every day.

Ja jednak wtedy myślałem  
O samotności ginących.  
O tym, że kiedy Giordano  
Wstępował na rusztowanie,  
Nie znalazł w ludzkim języku  
Ani jednego wyrazu,  
Aby nim ludzkość pożegnać,  
Tę ludzkość, która zostaje.

But that day I thought only  
of the loneliness of the dying,  
of how, when Giordano  
climbed to his burning  
he could not find  
in any human tongue  
words for mankind,  
mankind who live on.

Shot to death, wounded, beaten up by people in uniforms, arrested, tortured, deprived of rights, sent to camps, separated from their families, executed—those “behind the wall” will often remain anonymous to the world on the other side, alien both to those indifferent and those enjoying their “intimate revolt” sitting safe on the “right side of the wall,” who do not speak their language, although they claim they do. Heroes are, and probably have always been, lonely: a truism, beyond doubt, but one gaining a new dimension in the age of the social media, alt-facts and post-truth. Yet, even today, once the burnt wreckage of the hero, whose truth is not “alternative,” is cleared up from some modern Campo di Fiori, life ousts death again:

Już biegli wychylać wino,  
Sprzedawać białe rozgwiazdy,  
Kosze oliwek i cytryn  
Nieśli w wesołym gwarze.  
I był już od nich odległy,  
Jakby minęły wieki,  
A oni chwilę czekali  
Na jego odlot w pożarze.

Already they were back at their wine  
or peddled their white starfish,  
baskets of olives and lemons  
they had shouldered to the fair,  
and he already distanced  
as if centuries had passed  
while they paused just a moment  
for his flying in the fire.

I ci ginący, samotni,  
Już zapomniani od świata,  
Język ich stał się nam obcy  
Jak język dawnej planety.  
Aż wszystko będzie legendą  
I wtedy po wielu latach  
Na nowym Campo di Fiori  
Bunt wznieci słowo poety

Those dying here, the lonely  
forgotten by the world,  
our tongue becomes for them  
the language of an ancient planet.  
Until, when all is legend  
and many years have passed,  
on a new Campo dei Fiori  
rage will kindle at a poet's word.

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One may only hope. Clearly, humankind cherishes legends, but learns little from history. Between 1600 and 1943, between 1943 and 2018 walls have efficiently been giving us all a sense of a most dangerously false sense of freedom, which Anais Mitchell makes very obvious in her simple, yet thought-provoking song “Why Do We Build the Wall” from her 2010 album *Hadestown*. In the song, Hades, modeled after the Greek god of the underworld, teaches his followers thus:

Why do we build the wall, my children, my children?

[...]

We build the wall to keep us free

[...]

How does the wall keep us free, my children, my children?

[...]

The wall keeps out the enemy

And we build the wall to keep us free

[...]

Who do we call the enemy, my children, my children?

[...]

The enemy is poverty

And the wall keeps out the enemy

And we build the wall to keep us free

[...]

Because we have and they have not, my children, my children

Because they want what we have got

[...]

Because we have and they have not

Because they want what we have got

The enemy is poverty

And the wall keeps out the enemy

And we build the wall to keep us free

[...]

What do we have that they should want, my children, my children?

[...]

We have a wall to work upon

We have work and they have none

And our work is never done

My children, my children

And the war is never won

The enemy is poverty

*Walls,  
Material and Rhetorical:  
Past, Present,  
and Future*

RIAS VOL. 11, SPRING-SUMMER N° 1/2018

And the wall keeps out the enemy  
 And we build the wall to keep us free  
 That's why we build the wall<sup>1</sup>

It is precisely this kind of circular argumentation that, quite literally, revolves around the walls offering those (temporarily) privileged protection from the realization of the uncomfortable fact that they stand by while others suffer and die. Unable to see beyond the wall, one finds it easier to retain his or her sense of morality. But the opacity of the wall does not make it sound-proof: like those on the misleadingly peaceful side of the wall of the struggling Warsaw ghetto, one can undeniably hear the sounds of the losing battle. And even though not even the heroes themselves can blame us for not wanting to go up in flames like Giordano Bruno or to sacrifice our lives like the insurgents of the ghetto, valuing our “small stability,” our own little peace, we may still choose to take small-scale, unheroic action to help those on the other side. After all, as writers, teachers, public speakers and social activists, we can make others realize that their votes will count if they choose not to see themselves individually as “just another brick in the wall,” helpless and unimportant.

Not all of us are brave enough to be capable of true heroism. But this issue of the *Review of International American Studies* is a step towards a change. Combining text and image (which, apparently is worth more than a thousand words), it grants the international academic community an insight into the dramas playing out beyond the many walls that, supposedly, are to “keep us free,” although in fact they have become a prison of an illusion of safety and a weapon that may sooner or later be used against those who pretend not to hear the noise of the ongoing battle “on the other side.”<sup>2</sup>

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1. The quoted text comes from the following service: <https://genius.com/Anais-mitchell-why-we-build-the-wall-lyrics> (access 02.02.2018).

2. The text of Czesław Miłosz's poem “Campo di Fiori” and its English translation (“Campo dei Fiori”) by Louis Irribarne and David Brooks have been quoted after the *Babel Web Anthology—The Multilingual Literature Portal*, [http://www.babelmatrix.org/works/pl/Miłosz%2C\\_Czesław-1911/Campo\\_di\\_Fiori/en/6721-Campo\\_dei\\_Fiori](http://www.babelmatrix.org/works/pl/Miłosz%2C_Czesław-1911/Campo_di_Fiori/en/6721-Campo_dei_Fiori) (access 02.02.2018).

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