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**Author:** Dariusz Pawelec

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DARIUSZ PAWELEC  
(University of Silesia)

## THE HYMNIC CODE IN THE POETRY OF CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ

Miłosz's final volume of poetry entitled *Last Poems* (*Wiersze ostatnie*), published more than two years after the poet's death, contains, among the works he wrote after the appearance of *Second Space* (*Druga przestrzeń*, 2002), a short self-commentary dated 2003, which fulfils a double role: that of a prologue to the poet's final works and, at the same time, an epilogue summing up the totality of his literary achievement:

Records of my sense that I am alive, that I breathe. This is what my verses were, hence hymns of gratitude. And alongside this I was conscious of misfortune, of being wounded. And nothing in me was spontaneous, but under the control of the will. (MW 7)<sup>1</sup>

The triple use in three consecutive sentences of the verb "to be" in the past tense suggests a consistent division into three separate, though equally important dominant ideas defining the status of Miłosz's entire *œuvre*. We shall begin our examination of these authorial pointers with the final sentence, which addresses

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<sup>1</sup> Abbreviation refers to Czesław Miłosz. 2006. *Wiersze ostatnie*. Zebrała, przepisała i datowała ustaliła A. Kosińska. Kraków: Znak. The following abbreviations refer to other Polish editions of volumes of poetry by Miłosz: MD = *Druga przestrzeń*, Kraków: Znak, 2002; MN = *Na brzegu rzeki*, Kraków: Znak, 1994; MT = *To*, Kraków: Znak, 2000; MW-1 = *Wiersze*, vol. 1, Kraków: Znak, 1993; MW-2 = *Wiersze*, vol. 2; MW-3 = *Wiersze*, vol. 3. Digits following these abbreviations indicate page numbers; in the case of *Wiersze* volumes 1, 2 and 3, the first digit after the hyphen indicates the volume number and the following one the page number. Published English translations are given where they exist. Translations are taken mostly from Czesław Miłosz. 2001. *New and Collected Poems 1931-2001*. London: Allen Lane, hereafter NACP, followed by page number. The translations are by Czesław Miłosz and Robert Hass, unless otherwise stated in a footnote. As this is a more complete collection than Czesław Miłosz. 2011. *Selected and Last Poems 1931-2004*, New York: HarperCollins, it has been preferred. The latter contains, however, *Last Poems* (translated by Anthony Milosz) and will therefore be used for poems from this final collection, although *nota bene* the lines of self-commentary quoted above do not appear in the translated volume; the translation here is mine. Please also note that the order of the poems in *Last Poems* differs from that of the Polish 2006 edition. Translations of poems from *Druga przestrzeń* are from Czesław Miłosz. 2004. *Second Space: New Poems*. Translated by the Author and Robert Hass. New York: Ecco, hereafter SS, followed by page number. I have preserved the spelling of the translations, which uses American English and therefore sometimes differs from my own spelling elsewhere. Where no published translations are indicated, the translations are my own. These are literal translations intended to illuminate the content for readers of the current article, and make no claim to artistic perfection – Trans.

the status of the artist and the implications flowing from it for the “author’s image” and the position of the lyric subject. In the third sentence, the talk is of ethical status, associated with the moral dilemma that emerges in the process of artistic creation and the “attempt to avoid all these traps of mimesis”<sup>2</sup> which appear with the artist’s efforts to capture the complexity of reality. At the beginning, on the other hand, a genealogical status is defined, in which hymnicity is intermingled with the experience of Divinity, with the search for sacredness and participation in the religious imagination. This self-characterization directed towards the past highlights point by point three aspects of Miłosz’s work, which should be taken together in the process of trying to comprehend them, since they mutually illuminate and complement one another, and even condition one another. Hence, we cannot speak of the poet’s hymnicity without referring to his consciousness of misfortune; consciousness of misfortune in turn has to be examined in the perspective of the artist’s distancing himself from reality, of artistic creation “under the control of the will.” Clearly, each of these three elements can also be pursued separately, as crucial motifs in Miłosz’s work.

The sentence: “And nothing in me was spontaneous, but under the control of the will” has numerous earlier incarnations and developments in Miłosz’s work, both poetic and non-poetic. In *The Land of Ulro (Ziemia Ulro)* we read, for example: “And how could I make pretensions to ‘sincerity,’ I who go around in a corset, all self-discipline on the inside?”<sup>3</sup> In the poem *Evening (Wieczór)* we read the same sense in the cry: “Masks, wigs, buskins, be with me!” (MW-3, 321; NACP 505), and in the title poem of the volume *This (To)* in the challenge: “Writing has been for me a protective strategy/ Of erasing traces” (MT 7; NACP 663). “The poet of this epoch does not expose his face,” “He thinks coldly” (MW-1, 242), Miłosz observed in 1946 in a text entitled *Two in Rome (Dwaj w Rzymie)*. In many of his poems this motif is coupled with irony surrounding the situation of the artist and affecting especially the crucial experience for him of “a contradiction between art and solidarity with one’s fellow men.”<sup>4</sup> In the poem *Reconciliation (Zgoda)* from *Provinces (Dalsze okolice)* the poet is someone who “maybe [...] does not even have any human feelings” (MW-3, 338; NACP 525). In the same volume, the statement “A good person will not learn the wiles of art” becomes the punch-line of a reflection on the *Notebook* of the poet Anna Kamińska (*Reading the Notebook of Anna Kamińska*, MW-3, 343; NACP 531). In *Second Space (Druga przestrzeń)*, in Part III: *Treatise on Theology (Traktat teologiczny)*, the poet locates in the Hell of artists “people who valued the perfection of their oeuvre/ Over their duties as husbands, fathers, brothers and fellow citizens” (MD 82; SS 61). This concurs with the assertion that “one’s work stands in the stead of happiness [...]” (MN 77; NACP 641) from the poem *In Szetejnie (W Szetejniach)* – or with the following fragment from the poem *Orpheus and Euridice (Orfeusz i Eurydyka)*:

<sup>2</sup> Aleksander Fiut. 1990. *The Eternal Moment: The Poetry of Czesław Miłosz*, translated by Theodosia S. Robertson. Berkeley and Oxford: University of California Press, 8.

<sup>3</sup> Czesław Miłosz. 1985. *The Land of Ulro*. Translated by Louis Iribarne. Manchester: Carcanet, 12.

<sup>4</sup> Czesław Miłosz. 1991. “The Nobel Lecture.” In *Beginning with My Streets: Essays and Recollections*. Translated by Madeline G. Levine. New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 276.

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. (MW 43; SS 99)

In this and similar records, it is as though an echo of Thomas Mann's *Tonio Kröger* returns, even the very words of the story's protagonist when he declares that, as an artist: "One simply has to be something inhuman, something standing outside humanity, strangely remote and detached from its concerns."<sup>5</sup> Miłosz quotes these words and comments upon them in his essay *The Immorality of Art* (*Niemoralność sztuki*) in *The Garden of Knowledge* (*Ogród nauk*), observing that:

[...] the poet had to experience how painful it can be for his moral sense to become aware of the fact that his most noble, most human impulses are not his allies, and that his ally is rather his "cold, exacting position" – including when he writes a poem against inhumanity.<sup>6</sup>

In the words of Mann's protagonist, "Our stylistic and formal talent, our gift of expression, itself presupposes this cold-blooded, fastidious attitude to mankind."<sup>7</sup> In his *Notebook* (*Notatnik*) written in the 1960s, Miłosz, in considering the problem of the moral contradictions of the artistic profession, included words which could be treated as a paraphrase of Tonio Kröger: "Art is born out of the desire for good, but ideas and form require belief in the self, which stems from being enamoured with the dexterity of one's own intellect."<sup>8</sup>

This thread returns in a closely related form in Miłosz's Nobel Lecture:

"Yet to embrace reality in such a manner that it is preserved in all its old tangle of good and evil, of despair and hope, is possible only thanks to a distance, only by soaring *above* it – but this in turn seems then a moral treason."<sup>9</sup>

The need for artistic distance from reality and the requirement to create "under the control of the will" lead in Miłosz to an ethical confrontation since, as we read in *The Garden of Knowledge*, "This whole distance is difficult to accept morally and so the activity which owes everything to it, cannot not be suspect." The perfection of a work of art born as the result of distance and of "moral affliction" understood in this way therefore "has only an aesthetic right to be" and "appears to us as burdened with a certain debt."<sup>10</sup> From here stem, among other things, the traps and paradoxes of the mimetic approach to poetry, as well as the Nobel laureate's need to declare directly at the end of his life: "I was conscious of misfortune, of being wounded." In the poem written immediately after the war *On Birdsong on the Banks of the Potomac* (*Na śpiew ptaka nad brzegami Potomaku*), we could read

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Mann. 1999. *Death in Venice, Tonio Kröger and Other Writings*. Edited by Frederick A. Lubich; foreword by Harold Bloom. New York: Continuum, 21. The translation of *Tonio Kröger* in this edition is by David Luke.

<sup>6</sup> Czesław Miłosz. 1986. *Ogród nauk*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, 167. This text is not one of *The Garden of Knowledge* essays translated into English by Levine in *Beginning with My Streets* (see footnote 4). Translation is mine – Trans.

<sup>7</sup> Mann, *Death in Venice, Tonio Kröger and Other Writings*, 21.

<sup>8</sup> Czesław Miłosz. 1990. *Prywatne obowiązki*. Olsztyn: Pojezierze, 138.

<sup>9</sup> Miłosz, *Beginning with My Streets*, 276-277.

<sup>10</sup> Miłosz, *Ogród nauk*, 161.

just as directly: “I was the witness of misfortunes” (MW-1, 248); therefore the reader of Miłosz’s later poetry should not be surprised by the declaration earmarked for *Last Poems*. The inclusion of witness to misfortune as one of the three dominant elements of his poetic achievement is justified, however, by its close proximity to the two remaining elements of this self-characterization, and is meant to ensure their appropriate understanding. The author’s confession plays, as it were, in two directions at once: it justifies the “cold, exacting approach” of the modern artist and his activity “under the control of the will,” but it also secures the context for his hymnicity, outside of which the latter might otherwise be misunderstood. The tension that appears in this late, confession-like reckoning is thematized, after all, in Miłosz’s earlier poetry in a number of ways. In the poem written in Warsaw in 1942 entitled *To Poetry* (*Do poezji*) he speaks of mistaking the voice of poetry, which is meant to be “so unlike tangled complaints,” with “the voice of pain, the human voice” (MW-1, 217). Towards the end of *Lauda*, he says – “From a complaint hardly spoken, there grew up thanksgiving” (MW-2, 278; NACP 308)<sup>11</sup>. In *The Separate Notebooks* (*Osobny zeszyt*): “And I have lived a life that makes me feel unable / To bring myself to write an accusation. / Joy would spurt in amid the lamentation” (MW-3, 67; 377). And in the collection *This* (*To*), “the human voice will not cease to try / To forge a song for terror or glory” (MT 83; NACP 733)<sup>12</sup>. Meanwhile a “verse tribute” is accompanied by “black despair,” because “The age had made lament redundant” (MT 37; NACP 691). In one of his last poems, entitled *Arbor Vitae* (*Żywotnik*), he refers to “A huge cathedral [...] being erected, / Made of sighs, shouts, hymns and tears” (MW 22)<sup>13</sup>. Only our perception of the unifying role played by precisely such generic proximity in the tonality and form of expression of Miłosz’s literary art, can determine our appropriate reception of the sentence: “This is what my verses were, hence hymns of gratitude.” But this sentence – a manifesto of an approach that is not only literary, opening up for a reckoning with the artist’s conscience, and inextricably bound up, as I have attempted to show, with the other two elements – interests me above all as an expression of aesthetic reflection, as a summing-up of the entirety of the poet’s own achievements understood from a genealogical perspective.

Miłosz’s late confession confirms beyond doubt the hymnic stance of the voice in his poetry, already overt in his pre-war volume *Three Winters* (*Trzy zimy*), in the poem written in Paris entitled *Hymn*. Moreover, this is not the only direct authorial genealogical qualification of this kind found within the compass of Miłosz’s *œuvre*. He gave his volume of poetry published in 1982 the title *Hymn of the Pearl* (*Hymn o perle*), thus underlining the significance of the poem placed at the beginning of the book with this same title, which is, as the author’s note informs us, “a free adaptation” of an apocryphal text “of Gnostic origin” (MW-3, 7). Awareness of the hymn as a specific verse type is evident in numerous utterances contained in Miłosz’s poems. In *Second Space* we can find almost thirty such metadiscursive statements relating directly to the hymn. Most importantly, the poet’s self-commentary often strives to encompass the totality of his work within a hymnic space;

<sup>11</sup> *Lauda* is translated by Czesław Miłosz, Leonard Nathan and Robert Hass.

<sup>12</sup> Translation by Jennifer Scappettone and Martin Sabiniewicz.

<sup>13</sup> Miłosz, *Last Poems*, 291.



within this framework the hymn becomes a recognizable sign of the author's poetics, assumes in fact the status of a generic category, superior to the formally diverse utterances of individual lines. In this sense Miłosz could be said to return to Ancient Greece, when "the term 'hymn' was used in two senses: both in the narrower sense of a type or sub-category of verse, and in the broader sense of a genre," and when the "generic" application of the term *hymnos* referred in its original meaning to "practically every genre of archaic poetic creativity practiced in the epoch." With time the generic meaning of the word *hymnos* became more and more confined to "lyric songs of praise."<sup>14</sup> The unifying and at the same time totalizing role of the hymn, embracing the whole of Miłosz's work and defining the essence of his poetic experience of the world, may be seen very clearly in one of his last poems, entitled *Heaven (Niebo)*, where the initial lines of the closing stanza refer to the personal life of the poet, the lyric subject of the utterance, as having been a bodily "long journey among people":

If not for them [people], I would have been defenceless; watching them,  
I composed hymns

In honor of beech canoes, mirrors of smoothed metal,  
aqueducts, bridges and cathedrals.

Everything, which expresses our resemblance

To the Unstated, our Father in heaven. (MW 69)<sup>15</sup>

The hymnic "Everything" obviously refers here to the superior Divine order, which determines the choice of verse type. But in the poet's experience this is always complemented by the existence of some "second side," with its characteristic manner of informing us about it as, for example, in the accompanying note entitled *Page 39 (Strona 39)* from *The Separate Notebooks*: "He hears voices but he does not understand the screams, prayers, blasphemies, hymns which chose him for their medium" (MW-3, 76; NACP 386)<sup>16</sup>. As Marian Stala rightly points out, "In this poetry despair, bitterness, hope and wonder appear alongside and mutually condition one another."<sup>17</sup> The question arises: how, in fact, should the concept of a hymn be understood in relation to all the metadiscursive statements and direct signals found in Miłosz's verse that suggest affiliation to a particular type or genre? – and how especially, against this background, are other ways of invoking the hymnic tradition realized? Does the hymn exist in this poetry in a non-systemicized form – and if so, how?<sup>18</sup> Between the poem *Hymn* from *Three Winters* and the *Last Poems* we can observe in Miłosz's poetry an extended process of codification, for

<sup>14</sup> Józef Danielewicz. 1986. "Hymn w systemie gatunków liryki greckiej." *Pamiętnik Literacki* 77 (1): 36

<sup>15</sup> Miłosz, *Last Poems*, 298-299.

<sup>16</sup> Translation by Renata Gorczyński (sic) and Robert Hass.

<sup>17</sup> Marian Stala. 2001. *Trzy nieskończoności. O poezji Adama Mickiewicza, Bolesława Leśmiana i Czesława Miłosza*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 170.

<sup>18</sup> The hymn is obviously not the only type of verse or literary genre thematized by Miłosz. The problem of the "thematization of genealogical problems" is discussed by Józef Olejniczak in his article "Gatunek jako temat (przykład Czesława Miłosza)" in Włodzimierz Bolecki and Ireneusz

his own use, of the properties of the hymnic utterance. Clearly, such self-codification is carried out in constant dialogue with codifications that have already been attested historically – against the background of these, it becomes understandable and significant. On the one hand, Miłosz’s hymn takes shape against a background of non-hymns: screams, blasphemies, complaints, accusations, lamentations, laments. On the other hand, the poet’s hymnic space develops through the appropriation and subordination to its own needs of other, related types of verse, including when they appear in to be incapable a given moment of realization. In the poem *Not this Way (Nie tak)*, for example, “the hymn or psalm [...] falls apart” (MW 2-2, 240; NACP 273)<sup>19</sup>. In *Titanic (Tytanik)* the orchestra “plays a prayer-hymn” (MW-3, 281). Meanwhile in *Treatise on Theology (Traktat teologiczny)* Mickiewicz’s *Ode to Youth (Oda do młodości)* is called a “Freemasonic hymn” (“hymn masoński,” MD 75; SS 56). Even the mystery play written by his relative Oskar Miłosz is described by the poet in *Second Space* as a “hymn to the glory of God and man” (MD 97; SS 76). In Czesław Miłosz’s genealogical project, the hymn also has to fulfil an important mission in relation to the whole of literature. Through analogy with questions about the artist’s redemption and the place of his work in this plan, we can see how it is precisely the hymn that forms the basis of and justifies all literary efforts and intentions that arise, as we recall, “under the control of the will” (MW 7). The protagonist of *Biography of an Artist (Biografia artysty)* from the volume *Facing the River (Na brzegu rzeki)* was “Just not concerned, he promised his soul to Hell/ Provided that his work remained clear and pure” (MN 24; NACP 604). In *Private Duties (Prywatne obowiązki)*, when the artist is confronted by his dependency described in this way, a more directly expressed doubt appears: “It is said that we do not deserve Hell, because our work atones for our guilt, but perhaps that is yet another sentimental prejudice.”<sup>20</sup> In the literary order then, the hymn occupies a position analogous to a work which, in the order of the artist’s life, “atones for guilt”; because his hope and task is to compensate for his distancing, for his elevation of himself above reality, and also for his alliance with the “cold heart” and the “cold, exacting approach” – of which we may be persuaded when we read, for example, the question posed in the poem *Caffé Greco* from *Chronicles (Kroniki)*:

By what can literature redeem itself  
If not by a melopoeia of praise, a hymn  
Even unintended? (MW-3, 259; NACP 466)

The hymn becomes something of a synecdoche – a substitute for the poetic voice in general understood as a medium, as it does, for example, in the poem *Evening (Wieczór)*, in which the following couplet becomes as it were a mini-hymn to the hymn:

O hymn, O palinode, melopoea,  
Sing with my lips, you stop and I perish! (MW-3, 321; 505)<sup>21</sup>

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Opacki, eds. 2000. *Genologia dzisiaj*. Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2000, 67-76.

<sup>19</sup> Translation by Czesław Miłosz and Lillian Vallee.

<sup>20</sup> Miłosz, *Prywatne obowiązki*, 138.

<sup>21</sup> The of spellings of *melopoeia* and *melopoea* are transcribed here exactly as they appear in the published volume – Trans.

Awareness of the hymn as a verse type, as it appears in poems by Miłosz that thematize problems relating to its genealogy, is fundamentally consistent with theoretical formulations contemporary to him, as well as with conclusions arrived at by literary historical analysis. From the historical perspective, the earliest references for understanding present-day poetic creativity are, in the field that interests us here: antique hymns – with the distinct but important role played by Homeric and Orphic hymns, and later: biblical hymns, under which designation we may include the psalms of praise, as well as mediaeval hymns, or songs of praise representing the chief type of lyric poetry associated with the Church. Still, for Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski, as once for Plato in *The Republic* or *The Symposium*, it was clear that “if divine persons are the object of the praises, then we are speaking rather of hymns, which are praises to God,” as distinct from panegyrics, *i.e.* songs containing “praises not only of people, but also of inanimate objects including, what is more, other living creatures.”<sup>22</sup> The hymn was therefore the domain above all of poet-theologians. As Artur Hutnikiewicz observes:

The idea of the hymn is thus also associated since earliest times with the idea of the sacred and the sublime as well as with awareness of the organic link between this type of writing and a religious cult.<sup>23</sup>

On the other hand, the poetic hymn which appeared during the Renaissance era and which lacked in subsequent periods any close connection with problems of the sacred, “approximates (provisionally) to those other types of lyric that express praise, such as the ode, paean or dithyramb,” according to some dictionary definitions<sup>24</sup>. But in ancient times, hymnic creativity – according to Jerzy Schnayder – “is difficult to grasp, since hymns acquired with time a variety of different names (like dithyrambs, paeans, prosody).”<sup>25</sup> Crucial difficulties also arise when distinguishing between the hymn and the prayer, a distinction which has become somewhat blurred since mediaeval times and often led to their complete identification within, of course, the general designation of religious lyric. As Jan Józef Lipski concludes, “sometimes, as we know, it is difficult to distinguish the hymn *sensu stricto* from the prayer, the elevated religious or patriotic song, or the ode [...]”<sup>26</sup> A similar thing could be said of the distinction between the hymn and the psalm. “The psalm is focused on God, it is a hymn of praise,” Father Józef Sadzik writes in his preface to Miłosz’s Polish translation (from Hebrew) of the *Book of Psalms* (*Księga Psalmów*)<sup>27</sup>. The “harmony of psalms and hymns” (MT 63) is also mentioned in

<sup>22</sup> Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski. 1954. *O poezji doskonałej, czyli Wergiliusz i Homer. (De perfecta poesi, sive Vergilius et Homerus)*. Translated [into Polish from the Latin] by M. Plezia, edited by S. Skimin. Wrocław: Ossolineum, 246-247.

<sup>23</sup> Artur Hutnikiewicz. 1973. *Hymny Jana Kasprowicza*. Warszawa: Państwowe Zakłady Wydawnictw Szkolnych, 39. On the genetic link between the hymn and religious cults, see also: E. Sawrymowicz. 1946. “Hymn jako gatunek literacki.” *Zagadnienia Literackie* 3: 77-78.

<sup>24</sup> Małgorzata Semczuk. 1992. “Hymn.” In Alina Brodzka, Mirosława Puchalska and Małgorzata Semczuk, eds. *Słownik literatury polskiej XX wieku*. Wrocław: Ossolinem, 399.

<sup>25</sup> Jerzy Schnayder. 1960. “Hymn.” *Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich* 1: 141.

<sup>26</sup> Jan Józef Lipski. 1975. *Twórczość Jana Kasprowicza w latach 1891-1906*. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 221.

<sup>27</sup> Józef Sadzik. 2003. “O ‘Psalmach’.” In Czesław Miłosz. *Księgi biblijne. Przekłady z języka greckiego i hebrajskiego*. Kraków: Znak, 32.



Miłosz's poem *Zdziechowski* (MT 63; NACP 715), in a passage where the poet alludes to the works of this philosopher and former rector of Vilnius University. Another theoretical problem, pointed out by Lipski among others, is the difficulty of distinguishing between the ode and the hymn, while in English-language dictionaries "there is a tendency," according to Lipski, "to define the hymn as a particular type of ode."<sup>28</sup> In German theory, there appears the term "hymnic 'lyric of ascent'" which includes the ode and the dithyramb<sup>29</sup>. In this context, the synonymous uses of various generic terminology to describe verse types in Miłosz's poems cited above – the psalm-hymn, prayer-hymn or even ode-hymn – come as no surprise; while amongst the poet's output we also find odes, as well as numerous references to precisely this generic designation<sup>30</sup>. Also, *Dithyramb* (*Dytyramb*) occurs twice as the title of a poem – the first time in 1938, the second in the 1965 collection *Bobo's Metamorphosis* (*Gucio zaczarowany*) – a term that in antique definitions refers to a types of verse explained with the aid of the word *hymnos*, which represent a "specialized" type of hymn and yet acknowledge the "superiority of the hymn" over them<sup>31</sup>.

On the basis of an analysis of the metatextual statements contained in Miłosz's poetical texts, especially those where the type designation "hymn" occurs, we may conclude that his use of this designation exceeds or transcends its narrow generic meaning. The poet admits to "having composed hymns in honour of [...] Everything" (MW 69)<sup>32</sup>, while he describes the totality of his poetic output as "hymns of gratitude" (MW 7). In so doing, he acknowledges to some extent the archaic synonymy between of the scope covered by the concept *hymnos* and poetic creativity in general, yet he certainly uses the term as one denoting genre, in accordance with the earliest Greek tradition, but also surely on the insistence of theoretical and practical problems surrounding the hymn contemporary to himself. The question then arises as to how this consciousness – which can be established on the basis of the authorial "self-commentaries" internal to his verse, and which thus possess the value of theoretical reflections inscribed into the poetry itself, and are even expressed along the lines of a genealogical manifesto – finds confirmation in the hymnographic textual practice of the author of *Unattainable Earth* (*Nieobojęta ziemia*). Discussing the relationship between Miłosz's original poetry and his translations of the Bible, in particular his translations of the Psalms, Jan Błoński (in 1983) noticed his practical fulfilment of the linguistic rules of the hymn on the stylistic level:

In the lexis, syntax, increased use of metonymy, transformations in the idea of poetry (its literariness) – a high hymnic style is constructed, with which the name of the poet will surely be permanently associated.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Lipski, *Twórczość Jana Kasprowicza*, 235.

<sup>29</sup> Lipski, *Twórczość Jana Kasprowicza*, 235. According to Lipski, the term "Lyrik des Aufschwungs" was introduced by the theorist Friedrich Theodor Fischer.

<sup>30</sup> See Zbigniew Łapiński. 1985. "Oda i inne gatunki oświecone." In Jerzy Kwiatkowski. *Poznanawanie Miłosza. Studia i szkice o twórczości poety*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 446-457.

<sup>31</sup> Danielewicz, "Hymn w systemie gatunków liryki greckiej," 43.

<sup>32</sup> Miłosz, *Last Poems*, 299.

<sup>33</sup> Jan Błoński. 1998. *Miłosz jak świat*. Kraków: Znak, 212.

This style, according to the understanding presented here, transcends questions of exclusively biblical stylization – even though such stylization has been thought through at the very deepest level – or the effects of the “radiation of an ancient text,”<sup>34</sup> even if we accept that biblical translations can fulfil the function of a “poetic laboratory” and thus be what they were, for example, for Jan Kochanowski working on his *Psalter of David* (*Psalterz Dawidów*)<sup>35</sup>. Suggesting an affinity that goes beyond style between the collections *City Without a Name* (*Miasto bez imienia*, 1969) and *From the Rising of the Sun* (*Gdzie wschodzi słońce i kędy zapada*, 1974) and Miłosz’s *Book of Psalms*, Błoński asks more tentatively, albeit penetratingly: “is it not precisely this that would appear to be the general tendency in Miłosz’s mature work?”<sup>36</sup> When Błoński was originally formulating these propositions, he could not have known, of course, of the seven subsequent books of poetry by the Nobel laureate which would confirm his (Błoński’s) critical instincts, but which would also enable the scope for understanding hymnicity in Miłosz’s work to be expanded. Towards the end of the 1990s, after new reading experiences, Błoński points to the scale of this expansion in a quite definite way:

His poetry – especially in the second half of his long life – is an unceasing hymn in praise of existence. But this hymn is sung by so many instruments and in so many different tonalities that the reader – having lost his or her way – often forgets about the object of the hymn in favour of the hymn itself.<sup>37</sup>

The critic’s consciousness coincides here with the consciousness of the poet in suggesting an equation between poetry (in general) and the hymn. In the meta-poetic confession-hymn entitled *Report* (*Sprawozdanie*) from the collection *Facing the River* (*Na brzegu rzeki*), for example, hymnicity appears to be the very essence of poetic activity; the lyric subject of the poem also uses plural forms, thereby speaking in the name of the whole community of poets and their common “crusade”:

Under compulsion of the desire for the essence of the oak, of the  
mountain peak, of the wasp and of the flower of nasturtium.  
So that they last, and confirm our hymnic song against death. (MN 6; NACP 590)

Here a thought returns from one of Miłosz’s much earlier texts *Reading the Japanese Poet Issa (1762-1826)* (*Czytając japońskiego poetę Issa (1762-1826)*): “What is pronounced strengthens itself./ What is not pronounced tends to nonexistence” (MW-3, 28; NACP 350) – an idea that coincides moreover with the proposition of another great hymnist, Friedrich Hölderlin: “But what remains is founded by the poets.”<sup>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Błoński, *Miłosz jak świat*, 212.

<sup>35</sup> Błoński, *Miłosz jak świat*, 213.

<sup>36</sup> Błoński, *Miłosz jak świat*, 212.

<sup>37</sup> Błoński, *Miłosz jak świat*, 94.

<sup>38</sup> “Was bleibet aber, stiften die Dichter.” The statement forms the last line of Hölderlin’s poem *Remembrance* (*Andenken*). Translation is from Martin Heidegger. 2000. *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry*. Translated with an Introduction by Keith Hoeller. Amhurst, New York: Humanity Books, 105. The phrase is also invoked by Józef Sadzik in his discussion of the connections between Miłosz’s ideas and Heidegger (*Inne niebo, inna ziemia*), in Czesław Miłosz. 2000. *Ziemia Ulro*. Kraków: Znak, 21. Sadzik’s text also appears in the Instytut Literacki (Paris) edition of *Ziemia Ulro* (1977), but is omitted from Louis Iribarne’s translation (see footnote 3 above).

The generic meaning of the hymn, which manifests itself so powerfully in Miłosz's later poetry and is especially clearly expressed on the level of metadiscursive statements, requires an examination of its intertextual motivations. The question arises: is the word "hymn" merely an architextual metaphor, stubbornly persisting on the pages of successive volumes of poetry and deliberately archaizing the status of poetry and the poet; or does it also, apart from these functions, open up some kind of wider "*field of genealogical reference*" [my emphases – D.P.]?<sup>39</sup> Hence, I am interested in the references made in Miłosz's texts to the hermeneutic space of the hymn in its narrower understanding as a genre, as well as in the identification, precisely within this field, of diverse indexes of genealogical references existing in his poems<sup>40</sup>. I am therefore adopting for the purposes of my further reflections, a direction contrary to the one that has been binding so far. From uncovering the expanding semantic capacity of the concept of the hymn in the poetry under discussion, I wish to move to tracing concrete textual manifestations which point to the hymn as a literary genre. Accumulating generalized data and deducing from it the closeness of the hymn to other genres must now be replaced by the need to establish a "genealogical grammar" specific to the hymn and by an examination of the ways in which it is potentially applied by Miłosz. Because of the theoretical difficulties already mentioned in relation to the hymn, as well as its many-branched history, we should begin with a survey of how the genre was perceived in twentieth-century consciousness. Crucial to this perception is the question of the declining role of formal construction, and as a result of this, of the lack of any possibility of verifying a given, or merely putative generic qualification that depends on a paradigm of construction. Rather a unanimous view seems to prevail that the hymn has become "above all a semantic sign suggesting to the reader a particular type of reception, and referring to the sacred traditions of the genre,"<sup>41</sup> which would also include the sacralization of different objects of poetic expression, or the "constant expansion of the concept of the sacred," thus allowing "almost any theme or content that the author feels to be of crucial value or momentous importance to be recognized as an object suitable for hymnic treatment."<sup>42</sup> Faced with the unreliability of formal and thematic criteria<sup>43</sup>, the poet's own gesture becomes decisive in relation to other propositions – the poet, for whom the very choice of the hymn "is a manifestation to some extent of an ideological position, since its salient feature is the position of the lyric subject, who sees the world as a binary structure based on the opposition between the sacred and the profane."<sup>44</sup> This distinguishing feature remains in accord with the Greek inheritance. Approaching that inheritance with philological precision, Hans Georg Gadamer insisted that a distinction should be made between "praise," in the sense of a eulogy, expressing approval ("pochwała"), and "glorification" ("wysławiania") – and also what stems from this: namely the distinction between a poem expressing praise and a hymn,

<sup>39</sup> Stanisław Balbus, *Zagłada gatunków*. In: Bolecki and Opacki, *Geneologia dzisiaj*, 19-32; 27.

<sup>40</sup> I refer here to the conception of the hermeneutics of literary forms, as presented by Balbus (see note 39).

<sup>41</sup> Semczuk, "Hymn," 400.

<sup>42</sup> Hutnikiewicz, *Hymny Jana Kasprowicza*, 41.

<sup>43</sup> Hutnikiewicz compiles a list of eight possibilities; see *Hymny Jana Kasprowicza*, 43-44.

<sup>44</sup> Lipski, *Twórczość Jana Kasprowicza*, 236.

because “anyone is not free to praise anyone”; “on the other hand, glorification, like the hymn whose form it is, recognizes something that is absolutely superior, which transcends us and whose presence fulfils us.”<sup>45</sup>

A consequence of the attitude of wonder and distance towards something superior, captured here by Gadamer, are the emotions inscribed in the hymn, reflected in the elevated style but also in its transcendence, exaggeration or simply ecstatic culmination. Ecstasy defines one of the hymnic poet’s modes of behaviour, expresses the emotional engagement of the speaking subject and determines the atmosphere of the verse, which is to be an emanation of the religious “conviction that there exists in the very nature of being some supreme, unchangeable and indestructible value.”<sup>46</sup> As Hutnikiewicz puts it, “this value, which is felt very directly and powerfully, is portrayed in a tone of ecstatic rapture and humble reverence.”<sup>47</sup> Ecstasy is without doubt one of the favourite concepts in Miłosz’s dictionary, which means that this element of hymnic diction is given to us directly, formulated already in his poetics, as can be clearly seen in the self-commentary summing up the poet’s creative output in the collection *This (To)*:

And I confess my ecstatic praise of being  
Might just have been exercises in the high style.  
Underneath was this, which I do not attempt to name. (MT 7; NACP 663)

Miłosz included in *Hymn of the Pearl (Hymn o perle, 1981)* his own adaptations of “ecstatic poems” (MW-3, 83) by Kabir. In the collection *Daylight (Światło dzienne, 1953)*, he speaks of poets who, unlike the “poet of this epoch” – “sought ecstasy in words” (MW-1, 242). But “ecstasy” is above all a designation for meta-textual experiences, as in the poem *Capri*, when it serves to capture “full happiness, ravishment beyond all thought or concern [...]” (MN 13; NACP 585). It belongs among the poet’s most crucial words, because, as in the title poem of the collection *Bobo’s Metamorphosis (Gucio zaczarowany, 1965)*, it designates a fundamental way of experiencing the world: “From childhood to old age ecstasy at sunrise” (MW-2, 135; NACP 193)<sup>48</sup>. In *Second Space, in Treatise on Theology*, it becomes a paraphrase for life itself: “There is only our / ecstatic dance, a diminutive part of a great totality” (MD 79; SS 59). The author also exposes its erotic sense and link with desire, like the “ecstatic sign of union” (MT 23; NACP 213) in the collection *This*<sup>49</sup>. Characteristic of Miłosz’s imagination is the interplay of contradictory tones and feelings. Such intermingling of contrasts conditioning the fullness of human experience also affects the state of ecstasy: “I repeated their guttural songs of ecstatic despair walking by the sea” (*Year [Rok]* MW-2, 167; NACP 213)<sup>50</sup>; “Among the shrieks, ecstatic mumblings” [...] (*Fish [Ryba]* MW-2, 220); “Without understanding whence the years of ecstasy and with them the torment” (*Towards the End*

<sup>45</sup> Hans Georg Gadamer. 2001. *Poetica*. Translated [into Polish from German] by Małgorzata Łukasiewicz. Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 33.

<sup>46</sup> Hutnikiewicz, *Hymny Jana Kasprowicza*, 44.

<sup>47</sup> Hutnikiewicz, *Hymny Jana Kasprowicza*, 44.

<sup>48</sup> Translated by Czesław Miłosz and Richard Lourie.

<sup>49</sup> The phrase is from the poem entitled *An Honest Description of Myself with a Glass of Whiskey at an Airport, Let Us Say, in Minneapolis*.

<sup>50</sup> Translated by Czesław Miłosz and Richard Lourie.

of the Twentieth Century [*Pod koniec dwudziestego wieku*] MW-3, 102); “He manages to compile a register of pain, / Reconciliation, bliss, terror and ecstasy” (*Argument*, MW-3, 266); “It is pity and anger because after the ecstasy and despair and hope beings / similar to gods are swallowed by oblivion?” (*On a Beach* [*Na plaży*] MW-3, 367; NACP 559). Ecstatic rapture and an ecstatic tone are immanent in Miłosz’s poetic expression, very often evident in the transcendence of joy by a “contemplative-affirmative shade.”<sup>51</sup> They are apparent in his poetry from the very beginning (to mention only *Hymn* from *Three Winters*) and accompany it to the very end. At the same time it is important to remember that Miłosz’s poetry, as Aleksander Fiut points out, “Combines ecstatic praise of being with the memory of pain and annihilation.”<sup>52</sup>

What today may still be said to emanate from, or take up, the inheritance of the generic tradition of the hymn is chiefly its hymnicity<sup>53</sup>, or the special relationship inscribed into the verse between the speaking subject and object of glorification (or praise), and that which is superior, superhuman, Divine, this being a necessary condition for this style of communication. This relationship, fundamentally embedded in the utterance itself, and somehow also preceding it, subsequently finds expression and fulfilment in the various formal and linguistic configurations of the verse. The essence of this relationship, which is of an ideological nature, and which is uttered in a hymnic high style – as indicated by Błoński, can be found in Miłosz on the level of thematics or topoi and poetic semantics. What especially unites the hymnic structure into a whole is the poet’s demonstration of gratitude and acts of thanksgiving. In the succinct self-commentary that forms the prologue to *Last Poems*, as mentioned above, we read: “This is what my poems were, hence hymns of gratitude” Yet in one of his much earlier poems entitled *20<sup>th</sup> February 1938* (*20 lutego 1938*) we can already observe how the two key concepts come together in the poet’s imagination in a visionary foretelling of the future: “When the hymn of thanksgiving rings out, and the rye of the fields/ Shall be as Divine grace, the salutation of love” (MW-1, 107). A cry for the fulfilment of precisely such a hymn is the verse *Why* (*Dlaczego*) from the volume *Facing the River*: “Why hasn’t it risen, the powerful hymn? Of thanksgiving, of eternal glory?” (MN, 44; NACP 583). Likewise in the poem *Not This Way* (*Nie tak*), “thanksgiving” appears in proximity to a “hymn,” which cannot come into being in the desired form:

And the hymn or psalm of a choirmaster falls apart, only a canticle remains.  
My voice always lacked fullness, I would like to render a different thanksgiving.  
(MW-2, 240; NACP 273)<sup>54</sup>

In the lines of *Lauda*, “thanksgiving” appears in a position equivalent to “praise” (MW-2, 258-278; NACP 291-308). Even in the bitter poem *Without Reason* (*Bez powodu*) from *Hymn of the Pearl* we find the interjection: “How many acts of giv-

<sup>51</sup> Stala, *Trzy nieskończoności*, 161.

<sup>52</sup> Aleksander Fiut. 2003. *W stronę Miłozsa*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 53.

<sup>53</sup> Understood here as analogy to “elegiacity” (“elegijność”), as discussed by Anna Legeżyńska. 1999. *Gest pożegnania. Szkice o poetyckiej świadomości elegijno-ironicznej*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne.

<sup>54</sup> Translated by Czesław Miłosz and Lillian Vallee.



ing thanks” (MW-3, 49). The writing of *Treatise on Theology* is described in its opening lines as “simply a thanksgiving” (MD 63; SS 47). In an earlier text, from *Unattainable Earth* entitled *Thankfulness* (*Dziękczynny*), we read: “You gave me gifts, God-Enchanter” (MW-3, 236; NACP 449). Expressing what is earthly and human, one’s own life, in categories of a “gift” is a crucial element of the hymnic vision of the world in Miłosz’s poems. An excellent example is the Californian verse entitled *Gift* (*Dar*), as well as a much later text, equally clear, entitled *Awakened* (*Obudzony*), from the collection *This*: “I realized that this was an undeserved gift and I could not grasp by what grace it was bestowed on me” (MT 39; NACP 693). Or in the opening line of *With Trumpets and Zithers* (*Na trąbach i na cytrze*): “The gift was never named. We lived and a hot light created stood in / its sphere” (MW-2, 180; NACP 225). The intertextual trail has to lead us to Jan Kochanowski’s well-known song *What do you want of us, Lord, for your generous gifts* (*Czego chcesz od nas, Panie, za Twe hojne dary*), described by scholars as a “famous hymn,” and recognized as the “climax of Old Polish hymnody.”<sup>55</sup> Apart from the specific poetics of the gift and the establishment of a language of rapture to describe the created world, the motif of directly expressed gratitude also appears in Kochanowski: “Lord, we praise Thee from our grateful hearts.” The next important intertextual reference is in the line: “Thou didst lay the foundations of the vast Earth (nieobeszłej ziemi).”<sup>56</sup> A paraphrase of this becomes the title of a whole cycle by Miłosz: *Unattainable Earth* (*Nieobjęta ziemia*) and in so doing furnishes it with a hymnic structural framework. In the emphasis on the “unattainability of the world,” there is a hint of “what transcends us,” described by Gadamer as a condition for the hymn. Besides, Kochanowski’s “vast earth (nieobeszła ziemia)” also appears in Miłosz’s work as a crypto-quotation, in the poem *City* (*Miasto*): “And joy, and shame/ To live once more, on the vast earth (na nieobeszłej ziemi)” (MW-1, 140), and in the text entitled *St. Ig. Witkiewicz*: “On the sleepy fields of vast states (nieobeszłych państw)” (MW-1, 187). The poet therefore appeals to the hymnic tradition, clearly exploiting the mediation of Kochanowski, whose poem thereby acquires the value of an archetype of the genre.

We also find in Miłosz’s poetry allusions to classical hymnic structures, stretching back to the Greek tradition. Some of the most important among Miłosz’s hymnic resources are the laudatory elements, which usually take the form of epithets and enumerations. Their most frequent manifestation, however, is the direct use of the noun “praise (chwała)” as well as variants or different grammatical forms of the verb “to praise (pochwalać).” In the poem *Gates of Evening* (*Bramy wieczoru*), the laudatory function is amplified even by a triple anaphora:

We praise in the day,  
We praise in the night,

<sup>55</sup> Julian Krzyżanowski. 1964. *Historia literatury polskiej*. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 186.

<sup>56</sup> Jan Kochanowski. 1976. *Czego chcesz od nas, Panie*, in: *Dziela wszystkie*. Tekst na nowo skolonowała Barbara Otwińska. Tom 1. Oprac. J. Krzyżanowski. Wyd. 8, 268. There have been several translations of Kochanowski’s poem, I quote here that of Wiktor Weintraub as being close to the original – Trans. See Wiktor Weintraub. 1952. “Kochanowski’s Renaissance Manifesto.” *The Slavonic Review* 30 (74): 412-424.

We praise, when the century ends  
and when our generation takes its fragile footsteps (MW-1, 113)

The object of praise is most often God, to whom the phrase “That’s how I praise” (Jakoż ja chwale),” for instance, refers following the children’s singing in the verse entitled *Chagrin* (MW-3, 24). But it is not confined to the poet’s interest in this field, which may be clearly seen, for example, in the later poem *Blacksmith Shop* (*Kuźnia*), where we read the significant declaration: “It seems to me I was called for this: / To glorify things just because they are” (MW-3, 319; NACP 503). The most generalized formulation of poetic duty understood in this way appears in *Second Space*, in inseparable conjunction with a reference to its bitter reverse side, as is customary in Miłosz:

To praise. Only this has been left  
To the one who ponders, slowly,  
Misfortune upon misfortune and from which side they struck. (MD 43; SS 32)

The keyword “chwała” meaning “praise” or “glory” features in Miłosz’s poetry from the very beginning and embraces the whole of existence. Nature, for example, in *Slow River* from *Three Winters*: “Glory, pain and glory / to the grass, to the clouds, to the green oak wood” (MW-1, 35; NACP 18)<sup>57</sup>. Or people, as in the poem *Year*: “I would have related, had I known how, everything which a single / memory can gather for the praise of men” (MW-2, 167; NACP 213)<sup>58</sup>. “In splendour (W chwale) the earth’s poor moment renews itself,” in “Lecture VI” of *Six Lectures in Verse* (*Sześć wykładów wierszem*) (MW-3, 311; NACP 499)<sup>59</sup>. The calling of humankind, according to the text *Either-Or* (*Albo-Albo*), should be to “publicly testify to the divine glory / With words, music, dance, and every sign” (MW-3, 351; NACP 540). The prayer petition, which has a retrospective orientation, in the collection *This* upholds a similar spirit: “Give me the certainty that I toiled for your glory” (MT 94; NACP 743).

Since the age of Ancient Greece, the verb that is equivalent to the Polish “wysławiać” or “opiewać,” meaning to “glorify,” “extol” or “sing the praises of,” has precisely a hymnic connotation, belonging in the morphology of the hymn to expositional formulations<sup>60</sup>. The use of the verb in both its Polish variants in Miłosz’s poetry should therefore not surprise us: “I want to sing of festivities (opiewać festyny) / The greenwood into which Shakespeare / Often took me” (MW-1, 206; NACP 76)<sup>61</sup>; “Only this is worthy of praise (godne opiewania): the day” (MW-2, 126); “Vistula, so extolled in song (opiewana) by inspired rhyme” (MW-1, 142). The poet reaches more often for the verb “sławić” or “wysławiać,” which clearly distinguishes the hymnic from more commonplace forms of praise, a difference which, as we recall, was insisted upon by Gadamer. Already in a juvenile text entitled *2 Stanzas* (*2 strofy*), we read: “So it’s meant for us, to glorify (sławić)

<sup>57</sup> Translated by Renata Gorczynski (sic).

<sup>58</sup> Translated by Czesław Miłosz and Richard Lourie.

<sup>59</sup> Translated by Czesław Miłosz and Leonard Nathan.

<sup>60</sup> Józef Danielewicz. 1976. *Morfologia hymnu antycznego. Na materiale greckich zbiorów hymnicznych*. Poznań: Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu, 66.

<sup>61</sup> Translated by Czesław Miłosz, Robert Hass and Madeline Levine.

beauty” (MW-1, 75). Miłosz opens up the hermeneutic space of the hymn in a variety of ways. A trace of a classical expositional formula may appear, for example, perversely, from the point of view genealogical correctness, in the punch line of a poem, as in the text entitled *Hour (Godzina)*, where the lyric subject appeals to “mortals”: “So that they might praise, as I do, life, that is, happiness” (MW-2, 221; NACP 260). A similar thing occurs in the punch line of the poem *An Alcoholic Enters the Gates of Heaven (Alkoholik wstępuje w bramę niebios)*: “And so it must be, that those who suffer will continue to suffer, / praising your name” (MT 85; NACP 735). In *Return (Powrót)*, almost in the very centre of the poem, the following phrase occurs: “so that the beauty of the earth should be exalted” (MW-3, 370; NACP 563). But in the poem *Rivers*, for a change, everything is as though in its proper place, that is in harmony with the antique morphology of the hymn. “Under various names, I have praised only you, rivers!” (MW-3, 98; NACP 396) – we read in the first line, where there is also an apostrophe, typical of the genre in its Homeric variant, as well as a structural reference to the obligation to mention the name of God, in whose honour the hymn is written<sup>62</sup>.

Among the various methods by which the hymn is made present in Miłosz’s work, one is struck by a special type of metatextual hymnicity. In his poems, the poet alludes to hymns by other authors, cites them, comments on them, and introduces their titles into the compass of his own text. In the poem *Titanic (1912) (Tytanik (1912))*, from the volume *Chronicles (Kroniki)*, after the line “Here are the words of the hymn played by the Titanic’s orchestra” (MW-3, 282), there follows an 8-line quotation (the first 4 lines and last 4 lines), in the English original, from the song *Autumn* from a collection of hymns of the American Episcopalian Church, which was supposed to have been sung – according to some sources – at the time of the catastrophe. In *Second Space*, critical reflection on certain hymns is built into the verse:

An astonishing “Hymn for the Annunciation of the Holy Lady Mary” was written by the young anticlerical Mickiewicz a short time before his Freemasonic hymn known as “Ode to Youth.” He glorified Mary in the words of the prophet, *i.e.*, Jakob Boehme. (MD 75; SS 56)

In turn, in the poem entitled *Heavenly (Niebiańskie)* from *Last Poems*, we learn that “The poet William Blake [...] as he lay dying, sang triumphal hymns” (MW 49)<sup>63</sup>. In the volume *Unattainable Earth*, Miłosz includes several translations from Walt Whitman, regarded as a creator of the modern hymnic lyric, examples of which are certainly Miłosz’s translations of the texts *We Two, How Long We Were Fool’d (My dwoje)* and *As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life (Kiedy ocean życia zabierał mnie w odpływie)*. In the volume *Facing the River*, Miłosz, this time in his subjective role of translator of Polish literature, records his recognition of the “parahymnic” features of Anna Świrszczyńska’s poetry – in the poem *Translating Anna Swir on an Island of the Caribbean (Tłumacząc Annę Świrszczyńską na wyspie Morza Karaibskiego)*:

<sup>62</sup> Danielewicz, *Morfologia hymnu antycznego*, 66.

<sup>63</sup> Miłosz, *Last Poems*, 317.

And indeed, by praising being:  
The delight of touch in lovemaking, the delight of running on a beach,  
of wandering in the mountains, even of raking hay

You were disappearing, in order to be, unpersonally. (MN 28; 598)

In the poem *Toast* from *Daylight* (*Światło dzienne*), the poet alludes to Juliusz Słowacki's narrative poem *Beniowski* (1841) – an allusion whose hymnic sense appears to embrace, despite the intertextual address, not so much this one specific text but Słowacki's entire poetic output, according to the principle of *pars pro toto*:

Under their breath they sing the hymn of the great man  
Whose spirit after death, as he promised, triumphs. (MW-1, 301)

The recurrence of the hymnic code is one of the overall unifying factors in Miłosz's poetry. Points of reference to this code are scattered throughout his work in many different places, and operate with varying degrees of intensity. They take many forms, often provoking semantic interaction with other genealogical fields. In addition to these dispersed points of reference unifying his writing into some kind of hymnic whole, as well as similarly scattered references to the hermeneutic space of the poet's preferred genre, we encounter in Miłosz's volumes of poetry, texts which demand to be called hymns in the more precise sense of the term, trying to realize themselves in the classicist way, as proper generic paradigms. One of the best known and most frequently commented upon is the poem *Hymn* from *Three Winters*, already supplied with the author's generic qualification. Described by researchers as "juvenilia," it is nevertheless of exceptional importance in understanding Miłosz's whole output, since it is this and no other genre that foreshadows the future character of the poet's total achievement, available now today. As Marek Zalewski observes:

[...] in *Hymn* we find almost the ready-made world of Miłosz: delight in the beauty of the world and the sense of the transitoriness of any order, a taste for ultimate things, problems with the sinful *ego*, an apocalyptic view of events – a gaze capable of grasping reality in its highest form.<sup>64</sup>

The poet himself was aware of the significance of this poem for his whole achievement, as he put it in an interview: "[...] *Hymn* does reveal some of my basic tendencies. For me there are constants: on the one hand, an inclination to ecstasy, to union with the world of things, a desire to experience everything, to touch, to be in the stream of life, and, at the same time, a negative anxiety."<sup>65</sup> In the poet's self-interpretation, the motif of ecstasy often recurs – he speaks of: "the ecstasy of union with God, who is also the world," "*Hymn* is [...] on the side of ecstasy with the world."<sup>66</sup> Kris Van Heuckelom, in his interpretation of *Hymn*, draws attention

<sup>64</sup> Marek Zaleski. 2005. *Zamiast. O twórczości Czesława Miłosza*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 122.

<sup>65</sup> Renata Gorczyńska (pseud. Ewa Czarnicka) and Aleksander Fiut. 1987. *Conversations with Czesław Miłosz*. Translated by Richard Lourie. San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 109.

<sup>66</sup> Gorczyńska, *Conversations*, 108-109.

to the ecstatic nature of the lyric subject's utterance<sup>67</sup>. Zaleski, on the other hand, notices another crucial feature of the text: "The temporal constructions used in the verse transport the events into a mythical, static *praesens*."<sup>68</sup> Renata Gorczyńska expresses a similar perception: "*Hymn* is an ahistorical work, since it contains no references to a specific time."<sup>69</sup> These observations only confirm how thoroughly and deliberately Miłosz refers to the hymnic code and enable us to grasp their next important feature. For typical of the genre is the "metaphysical always and everywhere,"<sup>70</sup> in which the lyric subject of the hymn finds itself. Typical of antique hymns was the application of the so-called timeless *praesens*<sup>71</sup>, suggesting constant preoccupation with the described activity.

Other works by Miłosz, not already supplied with the author's generic qualification, may also be designated as hymns. One poem that certainly can be is *Rivers* from the collection *Hymn of the Pearl*:

Under various names, I have praised only you, rivers!  
 You are milk and honey and love and death and dance.  
 From a spring in hidden grottoes, seeping from mossy rocks  
 Where a goddess pours live water from a pitcher,  
 As clear streams in the meadow, where rills murmur background,  
 Your race and my race begin, and amazement, and quick passage. (MW-3, 98; NACP 396)

Marian Stala calls *Rivers* a hymn that is "ecstatic and meditative at the same time [...]":

The river here is not only an image of the fullness of being, understood dynamically, reconciling contradictions; it is also an image of concrete human existence, experienced internally, from an indefinite beginning to an enigmatic end, experienced – in all the registers of existence.<sup>72</sup>

What is important here for the hymnic perspective, from which we are examining the poem, is that "The ultimate consequence of this experience is the feeling of going beyond time, of liberation from its power [...]."<sup>73</sup> The final two lines of the poem speak directly about this:

While your endless flowing carries us on and on;  
 And neither is nor was. The moment only, eternal. (MW-3, 99; NACP 397)

Very much a classical hymn, appealing to the antique tradition, is the poem entitled *A Goddess (Bogini)* from the cycle *Lithuania, After Fifty-two Years (Litwa po pięćdziesięciu dwóch latach)*:

<sup>67</sup> Kris Van Heuckelom. 2004. "*Patrzeć w promień od ziemi odbity.*" *Wizualność w poezji Czesława Miłosza*. Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 46.

<sup>68</sup> Zaleski, *Zamiast*, 123.

<sup>69</sup> Renata Gorczyńska (pseud. Ewa Czarnecka). 1992. *Podróżny świata. Rozmowy z Czesławem Miłoszem. Komentarze*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 240. The citation is from *Komentarze*, not included in the published English translation (see footnote 60 above).

<sup>70</sup> Hutnikiewicz, *Hymny Jana Kasprowicza*, 43.

<sup>71</sup> Danielewicz, *Morfologia hymnu antycznego*, 16.

<sup>72</sup> Stala, *Trzy nieskończoności*, 175.

<sup>73</sup> Stala, *Trzy nieskończoności*, 176.



Gaia, first-born daughter of Chaos,  
 Adorned with grasses and trees, gladdens our eyes  
 So that we can agree when naming what is beautiful  
 And share with all earthly wanderers our joy.  
 [...]  
 Gaia! Whatever happens, preserve at least your seasons.  
 Emerge from under the snows with the trickling of rivulets in springs [sic, spring: na  
 wiosnę – Trans.].  
 Dress yourself for those who will live after us  
 If only in the green of mid-city parks  
 And the blossoming of dwarf apple trees in the garden plots at the edge of cities.  
 I depose my petition, your lowly son. (MN 16-17; NACP 591).

Here the very choice of the addressee of the hymn leaves us in no doubt: “the same Earth which, as they say, is a goddess,” (MW-3, 327; NACP 511), to use the highly appropriate conclusion to the poem entitled *Incarinated* (*Wcielony*) from *Provinces* (*Dalsze okolice*). Apart from the expository formula indicating the name of the goddess at the beginning of the text, this exposition also contains the traditional “genealogical reference” (“first-born daughter of Chaos”) practised, for example, in Orphic literature of “miniature forms” (without its development into a myth of origins)<sup>74</sup>. The poem fulfils several hymnic functions: expository, laudatory, illustrative (I refer here also to fragments omitted from the above quotation due to their length, but which may be regarded as equivalent to the *pars media* of the antique hymn). The whole poem ends, in accordance with the morphology of Callimachus, with a final petition. Expressed as good-natured litotes, it acquires in Miłosz’s rendition a distinctly ironic tone.

A separate group of Miłosz’s hymns are his prayer-hymns. The distinction between the hymn and the prayer is one of the most problematic points in the theory of both genres, as well as in interpretational practice. With reference to antique hymnody, there are three basic distinguishing features. First, prayer petitions contained in the structure of Homeric hymns are of a conventional nature and do not emerge from a context preceding the content of the petition – which means that they should be distinguished from the spontaneous position of a praying subject. Prayer petitions are also not obligatory in such hymns. Second, the antique hymn does not fulfil two typical functions of prayer: the hypomnetic and the votive (which is not to say, of course, that traces of these functions do not appear in hymns at all). Third and finally – in a prayer, the emotional emphasis is on the subject uttering the prayer, whereas in the hymn it is on the addressee<sup>75</sup>. In speaking of prayer-hymns, we are not so much seeking to blur conceptually the above-mentioned differences, as to demonstrate the poet’s reference to yet another realm of literary tradition. On the one hand, the closest tradition indicated here is that of the psalms, and on the other hand – mediaeval church lyric poetry, where the hymn is called a liturgical song of praise. A model example of the revival of this tradition in Miłosz’s poetry is the text *Veni Creator* from the volume *City Without a Name* (*Miasto bez imienia*, 1969):

<sup>74</sup> Danielewicz, *Morfologia hymnu antycznego*, 70.

<sup>75</sup> Danielewicz, *Morfologia hymnu antycznego*, 34, 80-81.

Come, Holy Spirit,  
 bending or not bending the grasses,  
 appearing or not above our heads in a tongue of flame,  
 at hay harvest or when they plough in the orchards or when snow  
 covers crippled firs in the Sierra Nevada.  
 I am only a man: I need visible signs.  
 I tire easily, building the stairway of abstraction.  
 Many a time I asked, you know it well, that the statue in church  
 lifts its hand, only once, just once, for me.  
 But I understand that signs must be human,  
 therefore call one man, anywhere on earth,  
 not me – after all I have some decency –  
 and allow me, when I look at him, to marvel at you. (MW-2, 177; NACP 223)<sup>76</sup>

A sign that Miłosz was inscribing himself into the mediaeval tradition is the title itself of the poem, repeating a hymn title that was preserved in many different versions of it. As Leonard Neuger demonstrates, Miłosz “after powerful and ostentatious signals indicating his sources,” then resigns from a realization of the generic model. In this text, we are dealing rather with the “barely feigned structure of a hymn,” the proof of which is, among other things, the “drastic reduction of imperatives (petitions) and the complete lack of attributes expressed *explicite* of the Addressee of the prayer.”<sup>77</sup> Miłosz, as Neuger shows in his thorough analysis, takes over only the basic structure of the hymn. He begins and ends with almost-quotations, but in fact reflects on what was “mentioned only in passing, as a supplement” in the model mediaeval hymn (*i.e.* the question of the “manifestation of the presence of the Holy Spirit through signs”). The poet upholds at the same time “the hymnic tension between what is anthropological and what is theological.”<sup>78</sup> Miłosz’s poem *Veni Creator* is therefore, from the genealogical point of view, a “conversation with the hymn” or even “a conversation within the hymn.”<sup>79</sup> In turn, Neuger suggests treating the poem *A Confession* (*Wyznanie*) from the volume *Chronicles* as a “facetious replica” of *Veni Creator*.<sup>80</sup> Aspects of prayerful hymnicity also appear across the poet’s work in more scattered or dispersed forms, intermingled with other types of poetic expression.

An original aspect, for example, is the relationship between hymnicity and epiphany. For Jan Błoński, poetic epiphany is brought about by the “once only-ness” (“jednorazowość”) of an experience, *i.e.* by an experience that happens once and once only – “moments of revelation” are held to be hidden in “specific, concrete sensory experiences.”<sup>81</sup> For Aleksander Fiut, “the encounter with the concrete in Miłosz’s poetry, resembles an epiphany but is qualitatively differently from it.” According to Fiut, “The ecstasy of the particular does not bring an epiphany,” because “an incomprehensible meaning is revealed to the poet.” “Imperfect epiphanies,” which stop in reality at the insurmountable frontier of the “moments

<sup>76</sup> Translated by Czesław Miłosz and Robert Pinsky.

<sup>77</sup> Leonard Neuger. 2000. “*Veni Creator* Czesława Miłosza. Próba lektury.” In *Poznawanie Miłosza 2. Cz. 1: 1980-1998*, edited by Aleksander Fiut. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 233.

<sup>78</sup> Neuger, “*Veni Creator* Czesława Miłosza,” 235.

<sup>79</sup> Neuger, “*Veni Creator* Czesława Miłosza,” 232.

<sup>80</sup> Neuger, “*Veni Creator* Czesława Miłosza,” 243.

<sup>81</sup> Błoński, *Miłosz jak świat*, 57-60.

just before revelation,” are therefore granted rather by the process leading up to this “moving frontier” and not by its fulfilment. Such existential experiences, in Fiut’s opinion, nevertheless “bear traces of their religious origin” – they are not merely “components of an aesthetic theory.”<sup>82</sup> Ryszard Nycz likewise observes the rather traditional character of Miłosz’s epiphanies, noting that “they never seem to lose contact with the theological genealogy of this category, nor with the sacral foundation of the search for the meaning of existence.”<sup>83</sup> One has to agree furthermore with another opinion of Nycz, that “epiphany in Miłosz’s work is neither direct self-revelation, nor pure technique.”<sup>84</sup> In other words, we have to recognize that in the poetic – and especially modernist – poetic record, the moment of epiphany is inevitably linked to the aesthetic moment. Because, as Umberto Eco reveals:

[...] the source of pleasure is no longer the fullness of objective perception, but the subjective choice of a certain trivial moment of experience, its transference into stylistic form, the formulation of a linguistic equivalent of reality.<sup>85</sup>

Another important point – for the hymnic perspective that interests us here – is that Miłosz’s epiphanic texts arise from rapture and are an expression, often ecstatic, of admiration for the “visible world,” and yet a kind of sacral *residuum* is preserved in them at the same time. Such poetic records, in the form of countless fragments of diverse length, are interwoven into the fabric of Miłosz’s work. There are whole poems, however, which I would willingly call epiphanic hymns, though an elegiac tone also filters through between the lines. Among these, there is above all the poem *Notebook: Bon by Lake Geneva* (*Notatnik: Bon nad Lemanem*) with its obvious allusion to Psalm 137 (verse 5: “If I forget you, O Jerusalem,” MW-2, 23) and final “Yes” directed towards the “eternal moment” with its intensely epiphanic depiction of autumn. Another example might be the peculiar epiphany of fire and simultaneous praise of life in the poem *Mittelbergheim*, which begins with a description that “makes present” the lyric subject’s personal experience:

Wine sleeps in casks of Rhine oak.  
I am awakened by the bell of a chapel in the vineyards  
Of Mittelbergheim. I hear a small spring  
Trickling into a well in the yard, a clatter  
Of sabots in the street. Tobacco drying  
Under the eaves, and ploughs and wooden wheels  
And mountain slopes and autumn are with me. (MW-1, 331; NACP 104)

– and culminates in an apostrophe to the superhuman element and affirmative double incantation:

Fire, power, might, you who hold me  
In the palm of your hand whose furrows

<sup>82</sup> Fiut, *The Eternal Moment*, 27-28.

<sup>83</sup> Ryszard Nycz. 2001. *Literatura jako trop rzeczywistości*. Kraków: Universitas, 168-169.

<sup>84</sup> Nycz, *Literatura jako trop rzeczywistości*, 169.

<sup>85</sup> Umberto Eco. *Poetyka Joyce’a*. Translated [into Polish] by M. Kośnik. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo KR, 61-62.

Are like immense gorges combed  
 By southern wind. You who grant certainty  
 In the hour of fear, in the week of doubt,  
 It is too early, let the wine mature,  
 Let the travelers sleep in Mittelbergheim. (MW-1, 331-332; NACP 105)<sup>86</sup>

The divine attributes of the addressee of this fragment give the final incantation the character of a prayer petition. The lyric subject's experiences range from fear to devotion and admiration. In this glorification, the condition mentioned by Gadamer is also fulfilled – as experience is transformed into the artistic form of the hymn: “the recognition of something absolutely superior, which transcends us and whose presence fulfils us.” Miłosz's epiphanizations of space coupled with his subjective states of rapture, I would call, somewhat figuratively, epiphanic hymns, thereby referring to some very distant chapters in the history of the genre<sup>87</sup>. On a similar, metaphorical basis, it is possible to link this category to yet another hymnic situation in Miłosz's poetry, namely his many attempts – described in various ways by critics – to recreate in language, in the poetic word, fragments of past reality<sup>88</sup>. As Zaleski observes, “Miłosz's word wants to be a hymnic word, it wants to extol what 'is' and resurrect what was,” but it remains, in Zaleski's opinion, only an “epitaph to emotions,” since it “cannot summon out of non-existence, do justice to what was.”<sup>89</sup> Let us add, however, that this process of “enshrining in marble” is independent of the intentions of the poetic gesture. The hymnist is fulfilled after all in the carrying out of his task (not in its fulfilment), when he responds to what he is called to do. “Hymnically, I call to you all and remind you” (MW-3, 38) – declares the lyric subject of Miłosz's poem *Leave Me Alone* (*Odstąp ode mnie*). This declaration describes in short the poetic model that begins to dominate in the late poetry of the author of *This* (*To*). For Miłosz's word indeed wants to be hymnic, especially in moments where we might expect rather a lament or elegy, and where he even comes close to expressing directly the vanity of all Orphic efforts. This is already the case in the collection *From the Rising of the Sun* (*Gdzie wschodzi słońce i kędy zapada*), in the pages of *The Separate Notebooks* (*Osobny zeszyt*) and, obviously, in many of the texts from *Chronicles*. An excellent example of hymnicity conceived in this way is the poem entitled *My Grandfather Sigismund Kunat* (*Mój dziadek Zygmuny Kunat*) from the collection *This*, or *A Polka-dot Dress* (*Suknia w groszki*) from *Facing the River*, or *A Beautiful Stranger* (*Piękna nieznajoma*) from *Second Space*.

The notion of the hymn in Miłosz's poetry transcends the boundaries of poet-

<sup>86</sup> Translated by Czesław Miłosz and Richard Lourie.

<sup>87</sup> See Danielewicz, *Morfologia hymnu antycznego*, 43-64. The main feature of the epiphanic hymns of Callimachus, which had “already completely lost any connection with cultic ritual” (43), is, according to Danielewicz, their “making present” or “appearing to make present the represented world” (64). The hymnist's technique depended on the mimetic recreation of cultic ceremonies (reconstruction of a modal framework), introducing the element of “the presence of the very god,” as a result of an epiphany – the revelation of the deity itself.

<sup>88</sup> Ryszard Nycz. 1984. *Sylwy współczesne. Problem konstrukcji tekstu*. Wrocław: Ossolineum, 56. Nycz proposes, for example, an interpretation of this feature of Miłosz's poetry in categories of *anamnesis* (reminiscence). On this topic, see also Zaleski, *Zamiast*, 171-191.

<sup>89</sup> Zaleski, *Zamiast*, 240.

ics. For hymnicity arises out of the experience of the sacred, “of what transcends us,” which determines the position of the poet and at the same time names the experience itself. Independently of its formal and artistic meanings, it provides succour for the eschatological imagination, as for example, in the ecstatic vision of the Kingdom of Heaven in *Gate of the Morning* (*Brama poranku*, 1938):

Constant whispers of hymns of adoration,  
interweaving long garlands of flowers and fruit,  
glitter of dances, quite unlike the rhythm of amatory relations (MW-1, 115)

In *A Poem On Frozen Time* (*Poemat o czasie zastygłym*, 1933), the hymn proved to be the best place for translating aesthetic tasks into social intention and became a source of prophetic power drawn from within the catastrophic vision that was then fulfilling itself, and yet allowed the germ of a positive transformation of the world to be plucked from it:

I watch, I listen.  
In order to extract forms, worthy of the time of my sons,  
in order to weigh up in my palm the shining disk of the most beautiful hymns  
And cast it  
Into fields of mist, into the boom of waterfalls of the future. (MW-1, 82-83).

In addition to the poetic power of the hymn, reminiscences of war emerge metaphorically from the poem *Reminder* (*Przypomnienie*, 1947): “And brief hymns of bullets were played in serial bursts” (MW-1, 272). Hymnicity appears above all, however, as an existential project, an imperative of existence, a life model offering no alternative directed, for example, at the “young,” as in the poem from the collection *Provinces* entitled in Polish *Dalsze okolice*, but translated as *A New Province*: “They should greet a sunrise with hymns,/ Compose every day a song of songs” (MW-3, 341; NACP 528). It describes a mythical time in the past: “We lived every day in hymn, in rapture,/ Not finding words, just feeling it is too much” (MW-3, 324; NACP 508)<sup>90</sup>. Miłosz’s “life in hymn” reminds us again of Hölderlin and his famous line “yet poetically, man dwells on this earth.” “To dwell poetically” means here, according to Heidegger: “to stand in the presence of gods and to be struck by the essential nearness of things. Existence is ‘poetic’ in its ground – which means, at the same time, as founded (grounded), it is not something earned, but is rather a gift.”<sup>91</sup> “For to exist on the earth is beyond any power to name,” Miłosz might add with a line from his poem *Report* (*Sprawozdanie*) from *Facing the River* (MN 6; NACP 589-590). Although in his work, of course, it is above all the existence of the lyric subject that is poetic, an existence whose nature is accurately described by Nycz:

As one of the elect [...] he lives poetically: between heaven and earth, far-removed from society and “disinherited of prophecies,” he fulfils his mediumistic calling [...], devoting his speech to the service of praising the “voices of poor people” and the “unnamed.”<sup>92</sup>

<sup>90</sup> The quotation is from *Linnaeus*, also in *Provinces*.

<sup>91</sup> Heidegger, *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry*, 60.

<sup>92</sup> Nycz, *Sylwy współczesne*, 57.



Analysing the poems of Czesław Miłosz, we may conclude that literary form gives a name to experience, which in turn demands literary form, seeks and – with varying success – verifies the possibility of a genuine coming into being. And it is precisely this rather complicated interconnection that best defines the character of Miłosz’s entire *corpus hymnicum*.