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**Confusion of Voices:  
The Crucial Dilemmas of Being a Human Being,  
Czeslaw Milosz’s Poetry, and the Search  
for Personal Identity**

In his last book, *Parcours de la reconnaissance*, Paul Ricoeur elaborates on the meaning of recognition. Recognition is a subject particularly dear to him from his encounter with Hegel (*Anerkennung*).<sup>1</sup> By broadening the understanding of recognition (mutual recognition in all its forms) beyond the customary interpretation and articulation of social divisions and identities within the binaries of identity and difference in political philosophy, Ricoeur analyzes the identification of anything as the thing that it is and the recognition of oneself as a capable agent (*l’homme capable*). Recognition has something to do with bearing witness through gratitude; that one is indebted to someone for something, or accepts someone as a person of certain quality. Human recognition of oneself as the “recognition-attestation” (*reconnaissance-attestation*) expressed by self-assertions of oneself and others is here of vital importance. Our ability to act presupposes that we are *capable agents*, recognizing ourselves as agents with various capacities: We are able to speak, to narrate, to act, and as such, are capable of taking responsibility. Ricoeur investigates how responsibility relates to personal and moral identity. However, he does not directly address the recognition of one’s personal identity, despite his persistent thematization of the dialectical relationship between *idem*-identity

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Ricoeur 2005.

(identity as sameness) and *ipse*-identity (identity as selfhood).<sup>2</sup> There is an implicit recognition of the self in recognizing images or memories. And there is something extremely striking in understanding oneself which happens when we make promises: We commit ourselves to something despite knowing ourselves and being aware of the possible changes and transformations. The asymmetry of the self and the other, however important, cannot blind us for the dissymmetries in the mutuality between the self and the other. The correlation between different forms of recognition, love, universal respect, the institutionalized legal recognition of rights, and the social dimension of politics, *Sittlichkeit*, as well as the negative forms of disregard all preoccupy Ricoeur's consideration regarding the importance of individual qualities in the life of others in the existential and political economy of struggle for esteem.

With reference to the inspired greatness as experienced in Augustine's *city of inspiration*, we can say that the recognition of others does not matter. However, living in the *city of opinion*, and thus being concerned with fame and reputation presents a human being with a significantly different task; to find oneself as a citizen of the different worlds demonstrates a great challenge to the individual. Understanding a world other than one's own is also a critical chance to understand something unique about oneself. What might be most illuminating is the discovery of gratitude (*reconnaissance*) as an adequate way of establishing mutuality in our human relationships, where a just distance integrates respect into intimacy. In fact, it is this inspired greatness, which allows us to make the most of everything that comes along our way. The greatest task we are entrusted with is to live our life to the fullest. And with or without recognition, it is our life-long task to find out what it means to be a human being. Finally, nobody and nothing can hinder us in our attempts to discover our own identity. (Is it really true?) In this hard, personal effort to work on ourselves, we recognize that the others who co-habit the world with us are themselves dealing with this enduring task. And they share their own experience with us, even if most of this seems to be incomprehensible to everyone: "I think that I am here, on this earth,/ To present a report on it, but to whom I don't know./ As if I were sent so

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<sup>2</sup> Ricoeur writes: "Le problème de l'identité personnelle constitue à mes yeux le lieu privilégié de la confrontation entre les deux usages majeurs du concept d'identité que j'ai maintes fois évoqué sans jamais le thématiser véritablement. Je rappelle les termes de la confrontation: d'un côté, l'identité comme *mêmeté* (latin: *idem*; anglais: *sameness*; allemand: *Gleichheit*), de l'autre, l'identité comme *ipseité* (latin: *ipse*; anglais: *selfhood*; allemand: *Selbstheit*). L'ipseité, ai-je maintes fois affirmé, n'est pas la *mêmeté*. Etc'est parce que cette distinction majeure est méconnue que les solutions apportées au problème de l'identité personnelle ignorant la dimension narrative échouent." Ricoeur 1990, p. 140; English, Cf. *Oneself as Another*, trans. Blamey 1992.

that whatever takes place/ Has meaning because it changes into memory.” (Czeslaw Milosz, “Consciousness”<sup>3</sup>)

For Czeslaw Milosz, a human life is not an existence of the disengaged, isolated, and solipsistic *cogito*, but an actively engaged being, dwelling with others (*Mitsein*) in a shared world.<sup>4</sup> Affectionate evocation of the faces and names of people, detailed recapitulation of fleeting moments, and the bringing to life of the smells, textures, and shapes of things, shows to us how this inspired greatness may transform our life. But can this transformation really happen? Is art, and especially poetry, able to have any essential impact on human lives? With reference to Hölderlin’s famous question from his “Bread and Wine,” we can still ask: What is the use of poetry in our needy times?<sup>5</sup>

Czeslaw Milosz, the winner of the 1980 Nobel Prize in literature, wrote most of his poetry in Polish, believing that poetry can only be written in the language one spoke in his childhood, even though most of his adult life the poet spent outside of his native country.<sup>6</sup> Since 1961, he had lived in the United States,

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<sup>3</sup> Milosz 2001, p. 431.

<sup>4</sup> For Heidegger, all human beings share the existential condition of being-in-the-world. Therefore, the other “does not mean everybody else but me” but those from whom the *I distinguishes itself*. They are, rather, those from “whom one mostly does not distinguish oneself, those among whom one is, too.” Heidegger 2003, p. 157. As Heidegger reminds us, “the others who are *encountered* in the context of useful things in the surrounding world at hand are not somehow added on in thought to an initially merely objectively present thing, but these *things* are encountered from the world in which they are at hand for the others. This world is always already from the outset my own.” Ibidem, p. 156. An encountered thing tells us in a primordial way that there is an other. Cf. Milosz’s “Watering Can”: “Of a green color, standing in a shed alongside rakes and spades, it comes alive when it is filled with water from the pond, and an abundant shower pours from its nozzle, in an act, we feel it, of charity toward plants. It is not certain, however, that the watering can would have such a place in our memory, were it not for our training in noticing things. For, after all, we have been trained.... Photography contributes to our paying attention to detail and the cinema taught us that objects, once they appear on the screen, would participate in the actions of the characters and therefore should be noticed.... The watering can has thus a good chance of occupying a sizable place in our imagination, and, who knows, perhaps precisely in this, in our clinging to distinctly delineated shapes, does our hope reside, of salvation from the turbulent waters of nothingness and chaos.” Milosz 2001, p. 648.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Wiercinski 2005, pp. 173-204.

<sup>6</sup> “Every poet depends upon generations who wrote in his native tongue; he inherits styles and forms elaborated by those who lived before him. At the same time, though, he feels that those old means of expression are not adequate to his own experience.” Milosz 1981. Cf. Milosz’s “In Warsaw”: “How can I live in this country/ Where the foot knocks against/ The unburied bones of kin?/ I hear voices, see smiles. I cannot/ Write anything; five hands/ Seize my pen and order me to write/ The story of their lives and deaths./ Was I born to become/ a ritual mourner?/ I want to sing of festivities,/ The greenwood into which Shakespeare/ Often took me. Leave/ To poets a moment of happiness,/ Otherwise your world will perish.” Milosz 2001, p. 75.

teaching Slavic literature at the University of California at Berkeley. In 2004 he died in Krakow and is buried at St. Peter's and St. Paul's church (*Skalka*) in Krakow in the existing pantheon for Polish heroes. "The death of a man is like the fall of a mighty nation/ That had valiant armies, captains, and prophets,/And wealthy ports and ships all over the seas." ("The Fall"<sup>7</sup>) This is definitely true about the poet's own death!

Milosz's concern for loss, destruction, and despair makes his voice into a powerful meditation on the human condition (*conditio humana*) in the world with a clear and strong emphasis on human hope, which at least partially, lives in the poet because of his religious convictions. His poetry is a constant dialogue with himself (*soliloquium*), with his personal experience, which in the course of the poetic discourse becomes the conversation with human history. The poet is well aware that his work has been essentially shaped by European cultural heritage and history. His personal journey toward himself is also a kind of reawakening of the self to the cultural signs. Milosz seems to share Ricoeur's view that "the self does not know itself immediately, but only indirectly by the detour of the cultural signs of all sorts which are articulated on the symbolic mediations which always already articulates actions, and, among them, the narratives of everyday life. Narrative mediation underlines this remarkable aspect of knowledge of the self as being an interpretation."<sup>8</sup>

The search for self-identity was a central motif in Milosz's work. His oeuvre can be situated in the realm of the fundamental search for what it means to be a human being. In his poetry, he re-examines the perennial questions of religion, art, and politics. However, he does not do so in the sense of *philosophia perennis*. He makes inquiries into the nature of poetry, trying to understand the nature of being a poet. A critical question regarding the human capability for negotiating the tension between self-understanding and the understanding of and responsibility toward others involves re-narrating one's own life story. And this re-narration is always poetic, because it involves everything regarding the human story, which can find its expression in language. Therefore, re-figuring or re-inventing the self means always re-narrating one's own life story in a way, which includes all tensions, pressures, and delights of struggling with one's own destiny and the moral imperative to take the responsibility not just for one's

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<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, p. 341.

<sup>8</sup> Ricoeur 1991, p. 80. "For Milosz, 'description demands intense observation, so intense that the veil of everyday habit falls away and what we paid no attention to, because it struck us as so ordinary, is revealed as miraculous, a revelation of reality known in Greek as *epiphaneia*... *epiphania*, epiphany, interrupts the everyday flow of time and enters as one privileged moment when we intuitively grasp a deeper, more essential reality hidden in things.'" Milosz 2001b, p. 383.

own life, but for the life of the other.<sup>9</sup> Milosz's concern for a poetry that confronts reality is an expression of his understanding of poetry as the unflinching pursuit of embracing everything that exists in order to help people to live their lives. The poet's responsibility is to bear witness to life in its amazing complexity. From this witnessing of life, hope is born: Hope for beauty, for love, and for perseverance despite the existence of anxiety, anger, and rage. In the footnote to his poem, "Poet at Seventy," Milosz confesses his continued "un-named need for order, for rhythm, for form, which three words are opposed to chaos and nothingness."<sup>10</sup>

What Milosz, as an unwearied researcher of the particularity of every human existence, is offering us in his writings is something of a distinct value. He does not attempt to fit into any paradigm, neither sociological, nor psychological, nor theological.<sup>11</sup> Searching for a fundamental understanding of a human being and its place in the cosmos, Milosz sets clearly his theological trajectory between protology and eschatology. He is deeply rooted in the experience of his origin, however illusive it might be. Yet, because his voice is so personal, it gets its true significance. The authority of a testimony gets the primacy over and above any of even the most elaborated expertise based on the academic research.

Milosz becomes often disenchanted with the socio-political realm on account of the failure to transform ethical and political life.<sup>12</sup> *The Captive Mind* as a study on the totalitarian mentality offers an examination of the poet's life under a communist regime and his subsequent reasons for defecting Poland.<sup>13</sup> Rejecting the new faith as reinforced by the communist regime, Milosz

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<sup>9</sup> Ricoeur 2002, p. 287. See also Ricoeur (1990) 1992, p. 290.

<sup>10</sup> Milosz 2001, p. 450.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Milosz, "Preparation": "I still think too much about the mothers/ And ask what is man born of woman./ He curls himself up and protects his head/ While he is kicked by heavy boots; on fire and running./ He burns with bright flame; a bulldozer sweeps him into a clay pit./ Her child. Embracing a teddy bear. Conceived in ecstasy." Milosz 2001, p. 429.

<sup>12</sup> Milosz 1953.

<sup>13</sup> Milosz was definitely aware of his public image and often expressed his desire not to appear as other than he was. Contrary to the widespread heroic image of him, Milosz declares: "And that image of me as a heroic figure, especially when I was in Poland in 1981 – well, I just happened not to disgrace myself so badly because I was living abroad the whole time, actually from the end of '45 on. I was crafty; I stayed outside the country.... But, oh, would I have disgraced myself had I stayed in Poland! And then all of a sudden, in the Solidarity period, they made me into something of moral authority.... I treat all that as a series of singular coincidences. It's very embarrassing to be held up as an example of integrity." Czarnecka and Fiut 1987, pp. 324-325. And Milosz concludes the conversations saying that "everything we've been talking about may be reducible to my discomfort when my image is too noble... too noble or too simple. And I am neither noble nor simple." *Ibidem*, p. 329.

decisively objected to their concealed forms of exercising power over the human mind. His personal life was a life of various transgressions on his way to understanding his own destiny as a human being. His penetrating search for self-understanding involves the unearthing of cultural, political, and religious presuppositions. Whenever necessary, Milosz disobeys any authority to let the tradition (in the Gadamerian sense of *Überlieferung*) speak to us. Thus, he passionately translates the Bible, enquires into Manichaeism and Thomas Aquinas; he reads his cousin, Oscar Milosz and Swedenborg, Shestov and Dostoyevsky, Simone Weil and Thomas Merton, and zealously hunts for the most beautiful poems from around the world.<sup>14</sup> His attempt to poetically retrieve the meaning of tradition includes an effort to disclose what is unsaid in great literary works. Thus, he never rests in his exploration of historical debts.

In his search for self-understanding, Milosz is wrestling with the gathering darkness through the passionate exercise of re-reading the great tradition in religion, philosophy, and literature. “When everything was fine/ And the notion of sin had vanished/ And the earth was ready/ In universal peace/ To consume and rejoice/ Without creeds and utopias,/ I, for unknown reasons,/ Surrounded by the books/ Of prophets and theologians,/ Of philosophers, poets,/ Searched for an answer,/ Scowling, grimacing,/ Waking up at night, muttering at dawn.” (“A Poem for the End of the Century”<sup>15</sup>) Having been brought up as a traditional Catholic, Milosz was quite obsessed with the doctrines of omnipotence and omniscience that were drummed into his mind as a child. Despite being quite unorthodox throughout most of his adult life, reading Manichaean scriptures, Swedenborg, Simone Weil, and Oscar Milosz, the poet was tortured by the fear of eternal damnation and the sense of sin (especially in sexuality) and was somehow unable to liberate himself from the toxic influence of his childhood.<sup>16</sup>

By expressing the existential tension between familiarity and strangeness in a poetic language, Milosz puts himself in the service of Being.<sup>17</sup> It is not the poet himself who gives the witness to poetry: Poetry gives a witness to itself. Therefore, a poet can profoundly speak of the witness of poetry.<sup>18</sup> In *The*

<sup>14</sup> Milosz 1997, p. iv: “I act like an art collector who, to spite the devotees of abstract art, arranges an exhibition of figurative painting, putting together canvases from various epochs to prove... that certain lines of development, different from those now universally accepted, can be traced.”

<sup>15</sup> Milosz 2001, p. 545.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Milosz, “To Father Ch.” and “Father Ch., Many Years Later”: “I could not understand from whence came my stubbornness,/ And my belief that the pulse of impatient blood/ Fulfills the designs of a silent God.” Ibidem, p. 436.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Wiercinski 2008, pp. 121-135.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Milosz 1983.

*Witness of Poetry*, Milosz calls poetry a “passionate pursuit of the Real.”<sup>19</sup> Earlier, in his *Nobel Lecture*, he asks: “What is this enigmatic impulse that does not allow one to settle down in the achieved, the finished? I think it is a quest for reality.” It is hunting for reality in order to preserve in poetic language everything that manifests itself as the Being of beings. The poet faces the tension between the imperative of language and the imperative of reality and “is left with the bitter realization of the inadequacy of language,” since the objective world can be seen “with perfect impartiality only by God.”<sup>20</sup> As in his *Esse*:

I looked at that face, dumbfounded. The lights of *métro* stations flew by; I didn’t notice them. What can be done, if our sight lacks absolute power to devour objects ecstatically, in an instant, leaving nothing more than the void of an ideal form, a sign like a hieroglyph simplified from the drawing of an animal or bird? A slightly snub nose, a high brow with sleekly brushed-back hair, the line of the chin – but why isn’t the power of sight absolute? – and in a whiteness tinged with pink two sculpted holes, containing a dark, lustrous lava. To absorb that face but to have it simultaneously against the background of all spring boughs, walls, waves, in its weeping, its laughter, moving it back fifteen years, or ahead thirty. To have. It is not even a desire. Like a butterfly, a fish, the stem of a plant, only more mysterious. And so it befell me that after so many attempts at naming the world, I am able only to repeat, harping on one string, the highest, the unique avowal beyond which no power can attain: *I am, she is*. Shout, blow the trumpets, make thousands-strong marches, leap, rend your clothing, repeating only: is!

She got out at Raspail. I was left behind with the immensity of existing things. A sponge, suffering because it cannot saturate itself; a river, suffering because reflections of clouds and trees are not clouds and trees.<sup>21</sup>

Being “in love with the world,” the poet is, at the same time, “condemned to eternal insatiability because he wants his words to penetrate to the very core of reality.”<sup>22</sup> For Milosz, “a poet stands before reality that is every day new, miraculously complex, inexhaustible, and tries to enclose as much of it as possible in words. That elementary contact, verifiable by the five senses, is

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, p. 25, p. 56, p. 66, p. 75.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, p. 74.

<sup>21</sup> Milosz 2001, p. 249.

<sup>22</sup> Milosz 1983, p. 74. For Milosz, every poet is a servant of Eros. Quoting Plato’s *Symposium* Milosz recalls that, a poet “interprets between gods and men, conveying and taking across to the gods the prayers and sacrifices of men, and to men the commands and replies of the gods; he is the mediator who spans the chasm which divides them, and therefore in him all is bound together, and through him the arts of the prophet and the priest, their sacrifices and mysteries and charms, and all prophecy and incantation, find their way.” Ibidem.

more important than any mental construction.”<sup>23</sup> Out of this existential tension between the wish to capture reality in words, which becomes the poetic imperative and the ever so painful realization that even the most beautiful words are not reality, poetry is born. And in poetry we are able to see: “Apple trees, a river, the bend of a road,/As if in a flash of summer lightning.” (“Preface,” from *Treatise on Poetry*<sup>24</sup>)

Human ability to see is accompanied by the persistent pain that “reflections of clouds and trees are not clouds and trees.” (“*Esse*”) This continuous suffering is the necessary condition of a poet to remain sensitive to the never-ending search for the word, which will not only be able to express everything but, in fact, preserve everything. Therefore, a poet is on a journey toward the *verbum entis*, always listening to the voice of Being.<sup>25</sup>

Poetry wants to encompass the whole of human life. It comes from life and entails the essence of human struggling with living life expressed in details of individual personal history: “My memory/ Does not want to leave me/ And in it, live beings/ Each with its own pain,/ Each with its own dying,/ Its own trepidation.” (“A Poem for the End of the Century”<sup>26</sup>) Poetic language cannot adhere to literary conventions, but needs to be saturated with all fabrics of reality: “Out of reluctant matter/ What can be gathered? Nothing, beauty at best./ And so, cherry blossoms must suffice for us/And chrysanthemums and the full moon.” (“No More”<sup>27</sup>)

Therefore, the task of a poet is to nurture his language: “Faithful mother tongue,/ I have been serving you.// Every night, I used to set before you little bowls of colors/ so you could have your birch, your cricket, your finch/ as preserved in my memory./ This lasted many years./ You were my native land; I lacked any other...// But without you, who am I?/ Only a scholar in a distant country,/a success, without fears and humiliations./ Yes, who am I without you?/ Just a philosopher, like everyone else.” (“My Faithful Mother Tongue”<sup>28</sup>) Milosz lives to the fullest the relationship between himself and language. For him, it is not only a question of trying to find new modes of poetic expression, but a search for a poetic way of life.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem, p. 56.

<sup>24</sup> Milosz 2001, p. 109.

<sup>25</sup> Wiercinski 2002, pp. 1-23.

<sup>26</sup> Milosz 2001, p. 545.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, p. 158.

<sup>28</sup> Milosz 2001, p. 245.

<sup>29</sup> Wiercinski 2011, pp. 37-58.



## Poetry as the Search for Personal Identity and the Primordial Question: What Does it Mean to Be A Human Being

Milosz is willing to ask the primordial question of what it means to be a human being without ever arriving at a definitive answer. There is nothing new in asking the fundamental questions.<sup>30</sup> “Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?” It is not the final answers that determine the way we live our lives, but the persistency of asking the questions regarding our relationship to the world and others: “If I am all mankind, are they themselves without me?” (“Study of Loneliness”<sup>31</sup>) In asking these fundamental questions, we ponder on our own self-understanding. The fundamental questions hinge on how we live our life.

This willingness to ask comes from the recognition of the poet’s vocation. Poetry waits upon the mystery of being human instead of forcing a systematic understanding. The nature of poetry is to remain open for the mystery of Being (in Heidegger’s sense of the *Offenheit für das Geheimnis des Seins*). Meditative thinking (*besinnliches Denken*) places a human being in the open horizon, which is the horizon of a dialectics of question and answer. Discovery of the personal identity is an interpretive process, which understands identity in its irreducibility to any defined notion conceptually elaborated and widely celebrated in the realm of calculative thinking (*rechnendes Denken*). The poet’s task is to be vigilant in order to see that which wants to disclose itself, and to reflect upon it in poetic language. Aspiring “to a more spacious form/ that would be free from the claims of poetry or prose,” (“Ars Poetica?”<sup>32</sup>) Milosz invites us to the laborious task of living the life of “silent integrity”: “The purpose of poetry is to remind us/ how difficult it is to remain just one person,/ for our house is open, there are no keys in the doors,/ and invisible guests come in and out at will.” (“Ars Poetica?”) The poet is well aware of the most terrifying experiences of a human being unable to find rest within one’s own personal horizon. Milosz comments:

My poetry has been called polyphonic, which is to say that I have always been full of voices speaking; in a way I consider myself an instrument, a medium. My friend Jeanne Hersch, who introduced me to the existentialism of Karl Jaspers, used to say, “I have never seen a person so instrumental,” meaning that I was visited by voices. There is nothing extraterrestrial in this, but something within myself. Am I alone in this? I don’t think so. Dostoyevsky was one of the first writers, along with Friedrich

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<sup>30</sup> “Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?/ D’où Venons Nous / Que Sommes Nous / Où Allons Nous” is the title of the one of most famous paintings by Paul Gauguin (1897). See Wiercinski 2010.

<sup>31</sup> Milosz 2001, p. 339.

<sup>32</sup> Ibidem, p. 240.

Nietzsche, to identify a crisis of modern civilization: that every one of us is visited by contradictory voices, contradictory physical urges. I have written about the difficulty of remaining the same person when such guests enter and go and take us for their instrument. But we must hope to be inspired by good spirits, not evil ones.<sup>33</sup>

The internal contradictions in the poet's life are powerfully captured in "Two Poems" in *Provinces*: While the first poem celebrates life, the second poem, "A Poem for the End of the Century," is an ironic yet painful recollection of the poet's religious past. The deeply religious underpinnings of Milosz's writings cannot be mistakably considered as the testimony of an orthodox believer of any particular religious confession. What is fascinating is the fact that the mature poet wishes to read those two contrasting poems together. Moreover, he writes in a headnote:

The two poems placed here together contradict each other. The first renounces any dealing with problems which for centuries have been tormenting the minds of theologians and philosophers; it chooses a moment and the beauty of the earth as observed on one of the Caribbean islands. The second, just the opposite, voices anger because people do not want to remember, and live as if nothing happened, as if horror were not biding just beneath the surface of their social arrangements. I alone know that the assent to the world in the first poem masks much bitterness and that its serenity is perhaps more ironic than it seems. And the disagreement with the world in the second results from anger which is a stronger stimulus than an invitation to a philosophical dispute. But let it be, the two poems taken together testify to my contradictions, since the opinions voiced in one and the other are equally mine.<sup>34</sup>

The complexity of Milosz's personality is rooted in his personal history. We can speak of different personalities within the poet. Milosz calls for accepting both sides of him – in fact, all of his contradictions – since to highlight either side over the other would be an ultimate distortion of his personal identity. Milosz encourages the play of paradoxes. He necessitates us to question the apparent opposition, which facilitates the possibility of multiple readings. What is definitely true about human life is the fact that it withholds any simple systematization. Poetic language allows many real anxieties and identity crises to be brought to the surface, although these are well hidden from the scrutinizing eye of a priest or a psychoanalyst, as regards the common idea of a life well lived. Instead, what we are dealing with, are the recurring question marks indicating the provisionality of life projects and their final incompleteness. In a diary published in 1994, *A Year of the Hunter*, Milosz

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<sup>33</sup> Faggen 1994/1995, pp. 242-273.

<sup>34</sup> Milosz 2001, p. 542.

eloquently addresses the confusion of voices he is experiencing in his own life while searching for his personal identity. He writes:

Critics have sought an answer to the question: What is the source of all those contradictions in my poetry? In my prose, too, for that matter. I could enlighten them by referring to the several personalities who reside in me simultaneously, whom I have tried to suppress, generally without success. I didn't want to be so volatile, but what could I do? I hope that this diary... will be valued as one more attempt at demonstrating that I was conscious of the incompatibility of my various personalities.<sup>35</sup>

Milosz reminds us that poetry does not allow for us to find refuge in the familiar. On the contrary, poetry is a constant reminder that what is at first, strange, alien, and inaccessible, offers us the unparalleled insights into the mystery of Being and the mystery of human Da-sein. The poet does not unravel the mystery; he presents the mysterious to us *as* the mysterious; the way it wants to be seen by us. Because poetry refuses to be mastered, it is also a clear protection from any human attempt to master others and exercise control by domesticating the power of language. Similar to Heidegger's poetic imperative to speak purely, which is the essential qualification of a primordial speaking (*ursprüngliches Sprechen*), Milosz invites us to reawaken our attentiveness to language, in which resounds the call of Being. Since language *speaks* and, therefore, is neither expression nor an activity of a human Dasein, the task of the poet is to nurture the language with everydayness.<sup>36</sup>

Milosz's poetry wrestles with divinity ("Oeconomia divina"<sup>37</sup>), and yet it houses the essential tension in human life and it stays there, saturated with all of life's minute details, as in "A Confession"<sup>38</sup>:

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<sup>35</sup> Milosz 1994.

<sup>36</sup> "Language speaks. If we let ourselves fall into the abyss denoted by this sentence, we do not go tumbling into emptiness. We fall upward, to a height. Its loftiness opens up a depth. The two span a realm in which we would like to become at home, so as to find a residence, a dwelling place for the life of man. To reflect on language means-to reach the speaking of language in such a way that this speaking takes place as that which grants an abode for the being of mortals." Heidegger 2001, pp. 189-190. "Language speaks. Its speaking bids the *dif-fer-ence* to come which expropriates world and things into the simple one fold of their intimacy. Language speaks. Man speaks in that he responds to language. This responding is a hearing. It hears because it listens to the command of stillness. It is not a matter here of stating a new view of language. What is important is learning to live in the speaking of language. To do so, we need to examine constantly whether and to what extent we are capable of what genuinely belongs to responding: anticipation in reserve. For: Man speaks only as he responds to language. Language speaks. Its speaking speaks for us in what has been spoken." Ibidem, p. 207.

<sup>37</sup> Milosz 2001, p. 263.

<sup>38</sup> Ibidem, p. 461.

My Lord, I loved strawberry jam  
 And the dark sweetness of a woman's body.  
 Also well-chilled vodka, herring in olive oil,  
 Scents, of cinnamon, of cloves.  
 So what kind of prophet am I? Why should the spirit  
 Have visited such a man? Many others  
 Were justly called, and trustworthy.  
 Who would have trusted me? For they saw  
 How I empty glasses, throw myself on food,  
 And glance greedily at the waitress' neck.  
 Flawed and aware of it. Desiring greatness,  
 Able to recognise greatness wherever it is,  
 And yet not quite, only in part, clairvoyant,  
 I knew what was left for smaller men like me:  
 A feast of brief hopes, a rally of the proud,  
 A tournament of hunchbacks, literature.

Life is the poet's dwelling place. The being of a poet is marked by an excessive intimacy with Being. Out of this excess, artistic creativity is born. This creativity is not a matter of the artist's own endeavor, but an expression of the gift of Being, which calls for the artist's creativity to individually appropriate the state of being gifted. For Milosz, the interpretive process in which we struggle for our personal identity is very often a solitary communion. The poet understands himself as a prophet, "but what kind of prophet?" Prophecy requires an audience: The voice of the poet needs to be heard. But who wants to listen to the witness of poetry? And why should we listen to such a witness, who is traumatized, painfully unsure of himself, distrustful of others, and also living a life indulging in many kinds of vices?

Milosz eloquently articulates the tragic plight of modern life.<sup>39</sup> In his enduring effort to encounter the divine, the poet is well aware of the sense of dislocation and loss of personal identity of a modern man. The direct result of the decay of Christian civilization is the widespread confusion about who we are as human beings. The personal identity and the self-understanding of oneself in a relationship to God are not anymore self-evident. On the contrary, the task for a human being is not to give up asking perennial metaphysical questions regarding our authentic cultural and religious roots, despite Nietzsche's famous proclamation "God is dead" and the advent of nihilism.

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<sup>39</sup> "A loss of harmony with the surrounding space, the inability to feel at home in the world, so oppressive to an expatriate, a refugee, an immigrant, paradoxically integrates him in contemporary society and makes him, if he is an artist, understood by all. Even more, to express the existential situation of modern man, one must live in exile of some sort." Milosz 1990, pp. 96-109.

What Milosz suggests, is a bold journey into the world of the metaphysical to rediscover the true sources of culture and philosophy. The troubled relationship between a human being and God plays an inherent role within Milosz's poetry. The religious struggle spans Milosz's entire life. Toward the end of his life, "approaching ninety, and still with a hope," he writes: "Now You are closing down my five senses, slowly,/ And I am an old man lying in darkness.../ Liberate me from guilt, real and imagined./ Give me certainty that I toiled for Your glory./ In the hour of the agony of death, help me with Your suffering / Which cannot save the world from pain." ("Prayer"<sup>40</sup>)

In *Facing the River*,<sup>41</sup> Milosz returns to Vilnius, the city of his childhood, to recognize the streets well preserved in his memory and to realize that the people from his past were gone: "Our memory is childish and it saves only what we need." ("Yellow Bicycle"<sup>42</sup>) Milosz's return to Lithuania is a chance for him to rethink his life as a human being and as a poet. In "At a Certain Age,"<sup>43</sup> Milosz shares with us his troubling experience of being confronted with the brutality of life:

We wanted to confess our sins but there were no takers.  
 White clouds refused to accept them, and the wind  
 Was too busy visiting sea after sea.  
 We did not succeed in interesting the animals.  
 Dogs, disappointed, expected an order,  
 A cat, as always immoral, was falling asleep.  
 A person seemingly very close  
 Did not care to hear of things long past.  
 Conversations with friends over vodka or coffee  
 Ought not be prolonged beyond the first sign of boredom.  
 It would be humiliating to pay by the hour  
 A man with a diploma, just for listening.  
 Churches. Perhaps churches. But to confess there what?  
 That we used to see ourselves as handsome and noble  
 Yet later in our place an ugly toad  
 Half-opens its thick eyelid  
 And one sees clearly: "That's me"

In his fascinating intellectual and cross-cultural journey, Milosz returns to his streets, and recognizes the many changes and losses. However, his return is first

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<sup>40</sup> Milosz 2001, p. 742.

<sup>41</sup> Milosz 1995.

<sup>42</sup> Milosz 2001, p. 415.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 579.

and foremost a bitter realization that this old man is the same one who considered himself once “handsome and noble.” The old poet returning to his native land observes his metamorphoses and wanders upon the mystery of his personal odyssey.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, finding himself left behind by those near and dear to him, he asks himself, “What did you do with your life, what did you do?” (“Capri”<sup>45</sup>) This is a fairly dramatic examination of conscience, but the old poet recognizes that there is nobody interested in hearing him. He definitely will not go to a psychoanalyst, as “it would be humiliating to pay by the hour/ A man with a diploma, just for listening.” And he will not go to confess to a priest, since he would need to know what to confess. Finally, he is left alone with his recollection of the past and faces the river in which he sees his old and present self: The same person, full of contradictions, but also blessed with the possibility to live his life. “You do not recognize me, but it’s me all the same,/ The one who used to make my bows by cutting your brown/ branches,/ So straight and so swift in their reaching for the sun./ You grew large, your shade is huge, you send up new shoots./ It’s a pity I’m not a boy anymore./ Now I could cut for myself only a stick, for, as you see, I walk with a cane.” (“To A Hazel Tree”<sup>46</sup>) What is happening during our search for personal identity is often a painful process of going through de-composing, transposing, and re-figuring

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<sup>44</sup> “Between the ages of seven and ten I lived in perfect happiness on the farm of my grandparents in Lithuania... I lived without yesterday or tomorrow, in the eternal present. This is, precisely, the definition of happiness. I ask myself whether I now mythologize that period of my life. We all build myths when speaking of the past, for a faithful reconstruction of fleeting moments is impossible. The question, however, remains: Why do some people speak of their childhoods as happy, others, as miserable? The extreme vividness and intensity of my experience forces me to believe in its authenticity. It was, I do not hesitate to say, an experience of enchantment with earth as a Paradise. I was a lone child in a magic kingdom that I explored from early morning till dusk... I was a little Adam, running all day in a garden under trees that seemed to me even bigger than they were in reality, with my perceptions and fantasies unhampered by the sarcastic jeer of a demon... I remained innocent, which means that I had not formed any judgment on the cruelty of the world. My happiness came, it seems, from – as William Blake would say – cleansing the gates of perception, in avidly seeing and hearing... Thus as a child I was primarily a discoverer of the world, not as suffering but as beauty... Many years later, at the age of eighty, I returned to the place of my birth and childhood. The landscape had changed... I did not feel any regret, or anger, or even sadness. I was confronted not by the history of my century but by time itself. Granted the privilege of return, what was most important at the moment was the tangible element of flowing time... I tried to grasp and name my feelings... Then something happened... I was looking at a meadow. Suddenly the realization came that during my years of wandering I had searched in vain for such a combination of leaves and flowers as was here and that I have been always yearning to return. Or, to be precise, I understood this after a huge wave of emotion had overwhelmed me, and the only name I can give it now would be – bliss.” Milosz 2001b, pp. 20-26.

<sup>45</sup> Milosz 2001, p. 585.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 665.

the initial notions we have of ourselves. Similar to the hermeneutic reading of texts, poetry encourages us to distrust the connections that are falsely forged to make sense of one's own life. The need to overlook the apparent in-consequences, defeats, and contradictions becomes a human being's true enemy on the way to personal identity.

With this newfound urgency, the old poet understands his poetic vocation. The power of poetry can bring the dead back to life, one by one. Poetry allows for the saving of each human being in its singularity. Milosz's poetry of witness finds its power in the rescuing of people and places, which causes constant suffering in the face of the impermanence of life exposed to oblivion. Poetry permits (and even encourages) a child and an old man to dwell together in the same place, at the same time, looking together toward the future: "I am a child who receives First Communion in Wilno.../ I am an old man who remembers..." ("Capri") In this poetic world, the here and there, the now and then, the present, the past, and the future are dynamically connected and alive: "If I accomplished anything, it was only when I, a pious boy, chased after the/disguises of the lost Reality./After the real presence of divinity in our flesh and blood which are at the same/ time bread and wine,// Hearing the immense call of the Particular, despite the earthly law that/ sentences memory to extinction." ("Capri")

The question of personal identity cannot be answered by introspection only. The identity of the self cannot be discovered only by looking inward. Our hermeneutic task is to see the human Dasein in the correlation to Being. In a search for personal identity, we are accompanied by Milosz with his great spiritual – or even religious – sensitivity to what we can call the cosmic dimension of salvation. Poetic language, which describes the intrinsic drama of human life, at the same time shows us that neither literature nor theology can dispense a human being from facing the existential truth of oneself. This truth needs to be rediscovered anew by each and every human being. Thus, Milosz strongly believes that there is always a good reason to be thankful "for good and ill": "You gave me gifts, God-Enchanter./ I give you thanks for good and ill./ Eternal light in everything on earth./ As now, so on the day after my death." ("Thankfulness"<sup>47</sup>)

Milosz's thankfulness does not come from naiveté, or any ideological or piously simplified religiosity. On the contrary, his thankfulness is a fundamental and substantiated trust in the mystery of Being; in understanding a human being not as the center of a self-created illusion of Being (*Schein des Seins*), but as an attentive listener to its mystery (*Zuhörer des Seins*). Following Heidegger's understanding of ourselves as mortals that dwell on the earth below the

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<sup>47</sup> Ibidem, p. 449.

mysteries of the sky, we can say that a human Dasein is a being that questions its own being as being-in-the-world. Our search for self-understanding happens while we are in the world. As human beings we experience ourselves in time (temporality of existence) and painfully feel that we cannot find any satisfactory way to deal with our being-in-the-world. However, we discover that we are metaphysical beings, which means that we can only cope with reality on the metaphysical level as (spiritual) human beings able to understand ourselves in and through our faith in God, *sub specie aeternitatis*. Believing in God, we can realize that our meditative experience allows for us to simultaneously experience past, present, and future, and as such this makes us God-like, who alone is timeless and omnipresent. It is much more than just a skillful play with words when Milosz confesses: “They are incomprehensible, the things of this earth.” (“Earth Again”<sup>48</sup>) This incomprehensibility is not reserved just for the things out of this world. In fact, because the things of the world belong to the mystery of Being, they too will remain incomprehensible to us.

Milosz never stops asking questions about himself. They are full of guilt and grief, but also joy and thankfulness. In “An Alcoholic Enters the Gates of Heaven,”<sup>49</sup> Milosz holds a conversation with God:

What kind of man I was to be you’ve known since the beginning,  
since the beginning of every creature.

It must be horrible to be aware, simultaneously,  
of what is, what was,  
and what will be.

I began my life confident and happy,  
certain that the Sun rose every day for me  
and that flowers opened for me every morning.  
I ran all day in an enchanted garden.

Not suspecting that you had picked me from the Book of Genes  
for another experiment altogether.

As if there were not proof enough  
that free will is useless against destiny.

Under your amused glance I suffered  
like a caterpillar impaled on the spike of a blackthorn.  
The terror of the world opened itself to me.

Could I have avoided escape into illusion?  
Into a liquor which stopped the chattering of teeth

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<sup>48</sup> Milosz 1986, p. 8.

<sup>49</sup> Milosz 2001, p. 734.



and melted the burning ball in my breast  
and made me think I could live like others?

I realized I was wandering from hope to hope  
and I asked you, All Knowing, why you torture me.  
Is it a trial like Job's, so that I call faith a phantom  
and say: You are not, nor do your verdicts exist,  
and the earth is ruled by accident?

Who can contemplate  
simultaneous, a-billion-times-multiplied pain?

It seems to me that people who cannot believe in you  
deserve our praise.

But perhaps because you were overwhelmed by pity,  
you descended to the earth  
to experience the condition of mortal creatures.

Bore the pain of crucifixion for a sin, but committed by whom?

I pray to you, for I do not know how not to pray.

Because my heart desires you,  
though I do not believe you would cure me.

And so it must be, that those who suffer will continue to suffer,  
praising your name.

Milosz somehow believes unconditionally in God, even though his is definitely not a faith free from painful quarreling with God, the Creator and the Savior.<sup>50</sup> Being brought up a Catholic, the poet lives under enormous tension, which finds its expression in a poetic form of irony about human fate.<sup>51</sup> What kind of God he must be, if he plants alcoholic genes in a human being? As the

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<sup>50</sup> Cf. Milosz, "Veni Creator": "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/ lift its hand, only once, just once, for me./ But I understand that signs must be human,/ therefore call one man, anyone on earth,/ not me after all I have some decency/ and allow me, when I look at him, to marvel at you." Ibidem, p. 223.

<sup>51</sup> Milosz, "Distance": "At a certain distance I followed behind you, ashamed to come closer./ Though you have chosen me as a worker in your vineyard and I pressed the grapes of your wrath./ To every one according to his nature: what is crippled should not always be healed./ I do not even know whether one can be free, for I have toiled against my will./ Taken by the neck like a boy who kicks and bites// Till they sit him at the desk and order him to make letters,/ I wanted to be like others but was given the bitterness of separation,/ Believed I would be an equal among equals but woke up a stranger./ Looking at manners as if I arrived from a different time./ Guilty of apostasy from the communal rite./ There are so many who are good and just, those were rightly chosen/ And wherever you walk the earth, they accompany you./ Perhaps it is true that I loved you secretly/ But without strong hope to be close to you as they are." Ibidem, p. 357.

omniscient God, he knows everything from “the beginning of every creature.” In fact, it is much worse. This God has decided for all eternity, the exact order of every particular human life and all existing things. “It must be horrible,” admits the poet, “to be aware, simultaneously, of what is, what was, and what will be.” In planning the whole life of a human being, knowing all subsequent developments of an individual, and bearing witness to human pain, God must find himself in a horrible position. And, as if this would not be enough, bearing witness to the pain of the individual is made much more unbearable for him by a simultaneous contemplation of “a billion-times-multiplied pain.” However, the poet confesses that he prays “to you, for I do not know how not to pray./Because my heart desires you.” This is a faith statement (*professio fidei*), which makes the poet believe against the horrible experience of the reality of life and the unfathomable desire of his heart to trust in God. This trust is not the faith of a child hoping that God will make everything whole, but predominantly a faith against the hope that God can cure him. The poet, despite many devils’ temptations (*svadente diabolo*) never managed to outgrow the yearning for the absolute. Therefore, notwithstanding not being always comfortable with his religious inheritance, he struggles to investigate the sources and limits of his religious anxiety. There is something, then, which compels him never to abandon the religious conviction of his youth. He confesses: “Had I not been frail and half broken inside,/ I wouldn’t think of them, who are like myself half broken inside./ I would not climb the cemetery hill by the church/ To get rid of my self-pity.” (“In a Parish”<sup>52</sup>)

What Milosz is addressing in his conversation with the Creator is a profound question of the mystery of human life, which is not reducible to any biologicistic or genetic accounts, however important they might seem to the understanding of the human organism. With the incredible growth of humanity’s potential to explain many previously unknown biological and physiological phenomena, the danger of a far-too-easy proclamation of some predetermined biological damnation to an irredeemably horrible life has also increased immensely. In our excluding and unaccommodating culture, we became self-proclaimed judges, claiming the right to decide whose life is worthy to live. This is by no means reserved for the debates on the right to life for the unborn (prenatal screening) and the right to death for the elderly (euthanasia). Even the most sophisticated genetic pre-screenings or enlightened social and medical standards cannot dispense us from asking the fundamental questions regarding human life. Milosz has the courage to discuss with God the elements that go beyond his personal suffering and uneasiness in order to better accept who he is.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibidem, p. 741.

The dramatic existential tension remains: Strong personal desire for God cannot delude the experienced human being that any help will come from God. Therefore, Milosz confesses: "I began my life confident and happy/ I ran all day in an enchanted garden./ Not suspecting that you had picked me from the Book of Genes/ for another experiment altogether./ As if there were not proof enough/ that free will is useless against destiny." This is an old theological question of predestination. Milosz's notion of fate seems, at least at first, to follow the Protestant/ Calvinistic understanding that life of a particular human being is entirely decided by God from the beginning of the world:

The doctrine of election declares that God, before the foundation of the world, chose certain individuals to be the objects of His undeserved favor. These, and these only, He purposed to save. God could have chosen to save all men (for He had the power and authority to do so) or He could have chosen to save none (for He was under no obligation to show mercy to any), but He did neither. Instead, He chose to save some and to exclude others. His eternal choice of particular sinners unto salvation was not based upon any foreseen act or response on the part of those selected, but was based solely on His own good pleasure and sovereign will. Thus election was not determined by, or conditioned upon, anything that men would do, but resulted entirely from God's self-determined purpose.<sup>53</sup>

This theological understanding – similarly as in Luther's deliberation on predestination – is very much in line with the ancient understanding of fate in different religions, cultures, and is succinctly expressed by Virgil: *Stat sua cuique dies* (to each his day is given or fixed is the day of every man).<sup>54</sup> And somewhere between Virgil's belief that *fata viam inveniunt* (the fates shall find their way) and Job's quarreling with God: "I asked you, All Knowing, why you torture me," Milosz positions himself. He is convinced that fate can do more than all the devoted efforts of men, as in the case of the destruction of Troy, and in rising up the Roman Empire. And yet, the whole poem is a kind of strange theology, of the poet's way of thinking, for whom the fear, guilt, shame, embarrassment, and disgrace are mingled with the joy of life and adoration for its Creator. There is no place we can hide from ourselves.<sup>55</sup> In his *Road-side Dog*, Milosz addresses the issue of believing in God not in spite of, but precisely because of the horrors he witnessed in his long life:

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<sup>53</sup> Steele, Thomas, and Quinn 2004, p. 30.

<sup>54</sup> Virgil, *The Aeneid*, X, 467.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Milosz, "Account": "I was driven because I wanted to be like others./ I was afraid of what was wild and indecent in me./ The history of my stupidity will not be written./ For one thing, it's late. And the truth is laborious." Milosz 2001, p. 395.

An atheist should accept the world as it is. But then whence comes our protest, our scream: “No!” Precisely this excludes us from Nature, determines our incomprehensible oddity, makes us a lonely species. Here, in a moral protest against the order of the world, in our asking ourselves where this scream the defense of the peculiar place of man begins.<sup>56</sup>

The most fascinating thing about this poem is its wonderful humanity. There is no easy solution to the various hardships in life. Milosz understands well enough that the prize for being sensitive to his poetic vocation is high. As an outsider, he intensely feels the tragic dimension of human existence; he is not rushing with any quick solutions and answers. He is not moralizing, but instead, allows himself to express everything, which bothers him. His interpretive imperative serves here as a powerful reminder that we need to be attentive to the very inner logic of the poem and read it always as a whole, taking into account all restrained poetic guidance. Already the poem’s title indicates a subtle irony: Does the poet consider himself an alcoholic? And does the alcoholic gain entry to heaven? Even if he is welcomed to the paradise, is it because of his faith? Is it because of predestination? Or is it merely a great surprise; a pure gift of the omnipotent God who can pick and choose as it pleases? Maybe the paradise is finally this heavenly state when we do not long for more drink, but our eternal life will be the permanent stage of happy drunkenness.

Milosz asks questions relevant to every human being with the humility (*humilitas–humus–earth*<sup>57</sup>) of a man who has experienced personal and political tragedy and who believes in fate and in destiny. It is a very strange mixture: The stubborn optimism of his heart and the pessimism of his intellect. But there is always hope, which is necessary to understand personal identity and to communicate something of vital existential importance to himself and the people around him.<sup>58</sup> What is even more striking is the fact that the poet seems to be surprised at his being in the new world. His courageous effort to find

<sup>56</sup> Milosz 1998, p. 103.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Prov 11: 12, *Ubi humilitas, ibi sapientia*. In this sense we can say that *humilitas veritas est*, humility is truth. Humility is the virtue of knowing the truth of created order, which leads to knowing the truth about oneself.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Milosz, “Meaning”: “When I die, I will see the lining of the world./ The other side, beyond bird, mountain, sunset./ The true meaning, ready to be decoded./ What never added up will add up, What was incomprehensible will be comprehended./ And if there is no lining to the world?/ If a thrush on a branch is not a sign,/ But just a thrush on the branch? If night and day/ Make no sense following each other?/ And on this earth there is nothing except this earth?/ Even if that is so, there will remain/ A word wakened by lips that perish, /A tireless messenger who runs and runs/ Through interstellar fields, through the revolving galaxies,/ And calls out, protests, screams.” Milosz 2001, p. 569.

a sense of homeland within his personal homelessness eloquently expresses the Heideggerian sense of being-in-the-world (*in-der-Welt-Sein*).<sup>59</sup>

For Milosz, poetry is a great affirmation of life in the face of suffering. He knows very well how to risk delight. As in his “Gift”<sup>60</sup>:

A day so happy.  
 Fog lifted early. I worked in the garden.  
 Hummingbirds were stopping over the honeysuckle flowers.  
 There was no thing on earth I wanted to possess.  
 I knew no one worth my envying him.  
 Whatever evil I had suffered, I forgot.  
 To think that once I was the same man did not embarrass me.  
 In my body I felt no pain.  
 When straightening up, I saw blue sea and sails.

“Gift” is one of Milosz’s poems on ordinary life, in which the poet relishes the profound joy of life. The beauty of life can be experienced if only we forget the evil we have suffered, free ourselves from disordered material security (dependence), and envy no one. Very often we are overly focused and worried about possessing material things and somehow, deep in our hearts, believe that our personal identity depends on owning earthly things. Milosz reminds us that happiness is to be found in being, not in having.<sup>61</sup> Wealth and possessions are often just substitutes for life. We are chasing life in its many appearances instead of celebrating life itself. Therefore, we fall often into greed, envy, vanity, insecurity, and anger. We are too attached to the way other people perceive us, and this behavior removes our peace. Far too often, we desire to impose our way of thinking on everyone around us and extinguish our own inner peace. Instead, Milosz invites us to accept our past, to not be overly embarrassed by who we were, and not feel guilty that we still are who we were. This is not a simple abandonment of the past. On the contrary, accepting oneself we start to see the birds, “blue sea, and sails.” Therefore, Milosz calls this poem “a gift”; it is a precious gift to be a human being who celebrates life. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons in the second century, situates the happiness of man within the relationship with God: *Gloria enim Dei vivens homo, vita autem hominis visio Dei*. (The glory of God is the living human being; the glory of being human is

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Wiercinski, 2010, pp. 225-234.

<sup>60</sup> Milosz 2001, p. 277.

<sup>61</sup> One of the seminal books, analyzing two modes of existence: The having mode, concentrating on material possessions, power, and aggression, and the being mode, based on love is a work of Erich Fromm. Cf. Fromm 2005.

the vision of God)<sup>62</sup> For Milosz, life is *the* gift. Accepting oneself and the world we live in frees our vision, encourages our growth, and brings peace. It is the most successful counseling therapy we can go through in the search for true identity in ordinary life. We all can be only who we are, and this is a task for the whole of life. This is the transformation, which comes from accepting life as a gift and thus turns it into a gift for others.

It is important to learn how to welcome the other into our own existential horizon. The desire for variety and the desire for the comfort of the familiar will haunt every human being throughout their whole life. It is a life caught between feeling rooted in the customary and known, and the searching for of excitement and the living out of existential curiosity. Given the fact that every individual horizon contains within itself certain limits, the meeting of different horizons permits an enrichment of each individual's own reality. This unconditional openness requires the affirmation of the evident differences between the horizons. However threatening those differences might be, the respectful merging of horizons offers the possibility of a deeper understanding of human existence. Such openness can serve as a personal enrichment in many ways: In helping to better understand the other; to better understand one's own self by learning to listen to, *as well as* be questioned by the other; and to desire a discovery of the true self in a common endeavor to glean what needs to be understood.

Milosz prizes life in its entirety; thus, every moment is precious. He arrives at peace not predominantly as a result of deliberation, but by exposing himself to pain and suffering, as in Virgil's *superanda omnis fortuna ferendo est* (every fortune is to be conquered by bearing it).<sup>63</sup> Living life is the source of joy. Our personal identity is constantly at work in our life, even if we are not consciously aware of whom we are. However, it is our personal identity which determines how we position ourselves in the world.<sup>64</sup> And the matter of positioning ourselves in the world is not a subject of assessing and articulating our

<sup>62</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 4, 20.

<sup>63</sup> Virgil, *The Aeneid*, V, 710.

<sup>64</sup> "The very way we walk, move, gesture, speak is shaped from the earliest moments by our awareness that we appear before others, that we stand in public space, and that this space is potentially one of respect or contempt, of pride or shame. Our style of movement expresses how we see ourselves as enjoying respect or lacking it, as commanding it or failing to do so. Some people flit through public space as though avoiding it, others rush through as though hoping to sidestep the issue of how they appear in it by the very serious purpose with which they transit through it; others again saunter through with assurance, savouring their moment within it; still others swagger, confident of how their presence marks it: think of the carefully leisurely way the policeman gets out of his car, having stopped you for speeding, and the slow, swaying walk over as he comes to demand your licence." Taylor 1989, p. 15.

self-understanding, but the realization of the inescapability of living our life, even despite the difficulty or even impossibility of making sense of it.

### Poetry as the Revelation of Being

Experiencing what it means to be a human being includes the realization of the nature of the relationship between a human being and the Being/world, as well as the nature of the relationship to the primordial source of existence. A human being is situated in proximity to Being. In this proximity, a human being discovers its ex-static attributes. Different from Greek tragedy, a poetic way of life is characteristic to the human mode of being (and not just reserved for the elected).<sup>65</sup>

Heidegger helps us to understand a human being as the existence in-between the human and the divine, and the earth and the heavens (*das Geviert*). In the *Ister* lectures,<sup>66</sup> he accentuates the uncanny nature of being a human being. We try to make ourselves at home, but we never succeed in domesticating the earth. We are never fully strangers, but neither are we fully familiar with the earth. What is unique about being a human being is this extraordinary tension between familiarity and strangeness.<sup>67</sup>

Heidegger plays here on the words *unheimlich* (uncanny) and *unheimisch* (not at home, unhomely). The fact that human beings search intently for their identities, as well as for what it means to be human does not guarantee that they will find what they are looking for, that is: their home. The heroism of being a human being consists in acknowledging the fundamental tension between familiarity and strangeness and living within this tension to the fullest, without ever attempting to overcome it for the sheer temptation to domesticate the earth. It is poetry, which allows the uncanny to surface on its own.

Milosz's poetry is fundamentally phenomenological in allowing Being to show itself in the pleroma of appearances. In fact, the poet struggles with the

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<sup>65</sup> Cf. Nichols 2009.

<sup>66</sup> Heidegger makes us aware that poetizing is always the inauguration of something, which means that the poetic vocation is a call to always bring anew to language the self-disclosure of Being: "This distinctive significance of the 'Now' demands that in this word of time we also come to hear something distinctly significant and await a concealed fullness of poetic time and so its truth. The 'Now come' appears to speak from a present into the future. And yet, in the first instance, it speaks into what has already happened. 'Now' this tells us: something has already been decided. And precisely the appropriation that has already *occurred* alone sustains all relation to whatever is coming. The 'Now' names an appropriative event." Heidegger 1996, p. 9.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Wiercinski 2006, pp. 269-295.

understanding of what it means to be a poet. Finally, the poet can only put himself into the service of Being.<sup>68</sup> Poetry allows Being to emerge into an appearance *in* beings. Poetic language lets beings be. With reference to human beings, poetry calls for a search for the deeper meaning of being human, and subsequently for an inquiry into the meaning of one's own personal identity. Poetry participates in the revelation of Being. The mode of poetic existence is the releasement (*Gelassenheit*), which lets the Being of beings (*das Sein des Seienden*) come into appearance in things. The vocation of a poet is "to glorify things just because they are."<sup>69</sup>

I liked the bellows operated by rope.  
 A hand or a foot pedal – I don't remember.  
 But that blowing and blazing of fire!  
 And a piece of iron in the fire, held there by tongs,  
 Red, softened, ready for the anvil,  
 Beaten with a hammer, bent into a horseshoe,  
 Thrown in a bucket of water, sizzle, steam.  
 And horses hitched to be shod,  
 Tossing their manes; and in the grass by the river  
 Plowshares, sledge runners, harrows waiting for repair.  
 At the entrance, my bare feet on the dirt floor,  
 Here, gusts of heat; at my back, white clouds,  
 I stare and stare. It seems I was called for this:  
 To glorify things just because they are. ("Blacksmith Shop"<sup>70</sup>)

The task of the poet is to glorify things. Milosz masterfully links his own childhood and the vocation of a poet. As human beings we are gifted with the power of seeing. The whole of life is enclosed in our seeing. And poetry allows us to share not predominantly *what* we see, but *that* and *how* we see it. "I stare and stare." We need to take the time to stare; no rush. And it might happen that we exclaim: "O happiness! To see an iris." (O!<sup>71</sup>) The power of seeing is also

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Wiercinski 1997.

<sup>69</sup> "Only if we assume that a poet constantly strives to liberate himself from borrowed styles in search for reality, is he dangerous. In a room where people unanimously maintain a conspiracy of silence, one word of truth sounds like a pistol shot. And, alas, a temptation to pronounce it, similar to an acute itching, becomes an obsession which doesn't allow one to think of anything else. That is why a poet chooses internal or external exile. It is not certain, however, that he is motivated exclusively by his concern with actuality. He may also desire to free himself from it and elsewhere, in other countries, on other shores, to recover, at least for short moments, his true vocation which is to contemplate Being." (*Nobel Lecture*).

<sup>70</sup> Milosz 2001, p. 503.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 683.



something essential in our relationships to the past, and particularly to those who are no longer alive: “And now they had nothing, except his eyes./ Stumbling, he walked and looked, instead of them,/ On the light they had loved, on the lilacs again in bloom./ His legs were, after all, more perfect/ Than non-existent legs.” (“City of My Youth”<sup>72</sup>)

Milosz’s *Six Lectures in Verse*<sup>73</sup> condenses his understanding of poetry and of the vocation of a poet. In 1985, Milosz encapsulates in poetic form, six lectures given by him in 1981-82 as a visiting professor of the famous Charles Eliot Norton Chair at Harvard. Poetry gives one a chance to embrace reality in its complexity; this creates for the poet a very demanding task: “How to tell it all?” Is there any way we can communicate the world and ourselves to others? It seems that in the poet’s understanding, what can be done is to offer to others a testimony of everything he himself receives as the witness of poetry. Here, “witness” is understood as the witness the poet bears to poetry and to others, but also as the witness poetry gives of itself. Poetry reveals itself; this revelation is simultaneously the self-manifestation of Being. By inviting a poet to participate in this celebration of witness, poetry necessitates the inquiry into the nature of being a human. All the existential doubts regarding human shortcomings cannot overshadow the mystery of human existence. The insightful examination of the past discloses the inherent inadequacy of mastering one’s life. The poet stands before people and confesses that like everybody else he “didn’t see clearly.” The maturity of a human being consists not only of high intellectual accomplishments, but also of the corresponding existential wisdom. There is no reason to rush anything. Milosz takes his time, and goes *per viam longam*: Trying to see everything; everything, which itself wants to be seen. “Seeing more” does not mean summing up individual experiences, but inquiring into the nature of what is seen and sharing one’s own subsequent understanding with others. And yet, the fundamental question remains: “How to tell it all?”

Every poetic word is anchored in the full complexity of life and as such, it enables sensitivity to life as uniquely lived by every human being. The power of language discloses the delusions people have of themselves. Poetry necessitates us to question our lives and the existential inadequacy of social and political norms and standards. We start with a simple endeavor to speak up and tell oneself and others about the unmasterable task of living our own life. This profound existential incapacity to cope with ourselves and other inhabitants of the world is, at first, a necessary step toward understanding the seriousness of one’s own condition (*conditio humana*) and the factual existential situatedness (*Hermeneutik der Faktizität*).

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<sup>72</sup> Ibidem, p. 596.

<sup>73</sup> Ibidem, p. 491.

For Milosz, human life is happening in-between two worlds: The world of transcendence and the world of history. The poet lives the existence of a stranger in both worlds: Wherever he moves he finds himself familiar with uncertainty, ambivalence, and undivided attention to all aspects of human life, and, at the same time, unacquainted with joy, harmony, faith, and peace. Finally, the poet is convinced that understanding oneself is a long life-long task.<sup>74</sup>

In a constant struggle to listen to his self, however dichotomized and broken, Milosz asks ethical questions which seem to be especially indispensable in the age of nuclear atrocities. The collision with the brutality of recent history shows the indisputable insufficiency of traditional ethical discourse. We need to learn to think and speak differently. It is definitely not enough to stick to the conventional and remain convinced that codified ethics could save the world. The poet states: “I should have – I should have what?” (“Lecture I”) Instead of simple answers, we have heavy-burdened questions. The world of culture and the world of institutionalized religion are not able to provide satisfactory answers. We are left without protection; that which a traditional structure was obviously offering to past generations. Instead of protection, we are left with unanswered questions in which we recognize all our existential contradictions of being situated in-between the transcendental and the historical dimension. And we are all at the service of culture, history, world, and religion. However, being engrossed by the world of culture and the world of history, does not offer any substantial support. The poet feels somehow lost in the world – and therefore – the more urgently does he search for his identity, in order to be able to cope with reality. Poetic sensitivity seems to be the best shield against getting blinded to the destructive power of history. What matters for the poet is to understand human life in all its epiphanies. He is convinced that the only way toward this understanding is to take seriously each and every life story in their uniqueness and concreteness. The poet takes on many roles as he struggles to understand human beings: As an outsider, as an observer, and as someone who is personally entangled in their own individual human history. In reminding us of the existing order, poetry does not make our lives any easier. On the contrary, poetry sensitizes us toward experiencing existential pain, even if it is the pain of the poet’s imagination. In fact, our suffering is constitutive for compassion. Its task is to save the name, to preserve it from perishing. Poetry is an immense call for the particular. It helps us to not lose an account of the singularity of any human being: “The true enemy of man is generalization./ The true enemy of man, so-called History,/ Attracts and terrifies with its plural number. Don’t

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<sup>74</sup> Cf. Wiercinski 2010, pp. 107-123.

believe it.” (“Lecture IV”) The image of the enemy of man is based on the fact that man is no longer understood in the dimension of transcendence, but only in the dimension of history, which neglects the idea of the person. The history is reduced to the understanding of mere necessity. It becomes something really inhuman.

Poetry, on the other hand, is filled with everything that is human. The language of poetry is the language of the earth and world, filled with the rhythm of the body: “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.”<sup>75</sup> To be a human being means to be an in-dividuum, un-divided. *Persona est intellectualis naturae incommunicabilis existentia* (A person is an incommunicable existence of an intellectual nature – Victor of St Hugo). But this person wants to communicate with oneself (*soliloquium*) and with the other (*con-versatio*).

There is nothing in a personal story which cannot engage the attentive other. History is interested in people and events that apparently shape the fate of humankind. Poetry, to the contrary, wishes to preserve everything that is individual, as Miss Jadwiga’s name, and to keep her remembered. In the heartbeats of poetry, every human life finds its eternal preservation. The poet’s confrontation with time and its withering effect is evident in his recognition of fidelity to detail. The flow of time can only be captured by focusing on the real, the individual; on what constitutes a being in its Beingness as the manifestation of Being. Poetry saves the fragility of human life and the transience of things in the world: In real life, things and people are destroyed. Human history shows that not only individual people, but also entire cultures have been annihilated. Only in poetry they can survive: “Miss Jadwiga,/A little hunchback, librarian by profession,/Who perished in the shelter of an apartment house/That was considered safe but toppled down.” (“Lecture IV”) Poetry always fuses the story of an individual with a particular historical circumstance.

Milosz’s poetry sustains the drama of a human being toward the direction of a particular fate. And he muses that “perhaps some peculiar currents circulate between a literary work, its readers, and the posthumous lives of its characters.” (“Undressing Justine”<sup>76</sup>) A poetic language with its limitedness reminds us that “probably a commentary is impossible, as, until now, no language has been invented comprehensible to both the living and the dead.” (“Undressing Justine”) The only true hope of man lies in understanding the indisputable

<sup>75</sup> Milosz 1986.

<sup>76</sup> Milosz 2001, p. 619.

greatness of any human being. Asking a question about personal identity brings the poet close to other human beings: "On Sunday I go to church and pray/ with all the others./ Who am I to think that I am different?/ Enough that I don't listen to what the/ priests blabber in their sermons./ Otherwise, I would have to concede/ that I reject common sense." ("Helene's Religion"<sup>77</sup>)

In order to not surrender to the predominant tendency toward generalization, we need to cultivate a careful fidelity to detail. The "so-called history" is nothing more than theory and the product of human speculation. With its claim to be wholly objective, it decisively leads to the dehumanization and de-personalization of human history. Therefore, what attracts the attention of the poet is that which is fragile and transitory. The poetic account of reality matures on the path through the particularity of the world in all phenomenal disclosures, and stands in clear opposition to generalization in the sense of unlimited accumulation of abstract ideas. In the order of history, people are not loyal to the order of transcendence. They do not live consistently according to the truth that Christ embodies in himself. In the face of the privatization of religion and the loss of its social relevance, the poet must ask for the truth. Since there is a possibility of coexistence between the order of transcendence and the order of history, the true discovery means that "the impossible, what no one can bear,/Is again accepted and acknowledged." ("Lecture VI") And the poet, who finds himself in the role of the comforter, discovers that it is the truth which brings true comfort, and admits that while consoling himself also, remains "not very much consoled." ("Lecture VI") An understanding of the human condition requires an acceptance of the variety of dimensions, which will remain unexplained. The destiny of human life rooted in reality continues to be a mystery: "This too is real. The din ceases./ Memory closes down its dark waters./ And those, as if behind a glass, stare out, silent." ("Lecture VI")

Ultimately, knowledge is not equivalent to understanding. Trust in knowledge cannot really save people. Only poetry can offer serious help in dealing with reality, since it encompasses the complexity of human life. The witness of poetry is a powerful reminder of the existential imperative to search for truth. Being in the service of poetry, the poet undertakes everything possible to understand the mystery of his poetic vocation. Within the task of telling everything, the vision of wholeness can save a human being by keeping them within the realm of Being. It is only possible as a result of a consciously experienced reality.

What is particularly interesting in the testimony of a poet is the fact that he is the receiver and giver of a testimony. In the task of self-understanding as a poet,

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<sup>77</sup> Ibidem, p. 652.

both aspects are essential, in the act of being a teacher and student simultaneously, with all the accompanying manifestations: Personal insecurity, uncertainty, humility, or even existential anxiety on the one hand, and on the other, the certainty and determination in living the poetic vocation to the fullest. In fact, this inner tension aptly describes the condition of a poet and is expressed as the tension between understanding the task of the poet: “to tell it all” and the uncertainty of it: “how to tell it all.” Between the poet’s mastery and his uncertainty, both equally describe his identity. He is not only the wise master and teacher, but also the humble servant of poetry and as well, its guardian. He is always the same person in whom it is proper to unite in spirit contrary yet complementary properties. “I confess to you, my young students,” (“Lecture I”) brings yet another dimension to self-understanding of a poet: It is of essential importance to expose oneself to others and to admit to the final inadequacy of fulfilling the task of the poet, despite the honest determination to live the poetic vocation. Confessing the personal shortcomings is a best way of communicating wisdom to oneself and to others and thus serves as an indisputable help for maturing as the self.

The poet is engaged in a dialogue which is happening at many levels. It is a dialogue with his self and with the deeply wounded ego. Because of the poet’s sensitivity, he is well aware of his own failures; in fact, he exposes them in a poetic form, almost like St Paul boasts in his weakness (2 Cor 12: 1-10).<sup>78</sup> Suffering has here a pedagogical purpose. On the one hand, it demonstrates the unambiguity of human frailty and limitation. On the other hand, it shows that the real greatness of the human being comes not from oneself. Similar to St Paul, for whom “the power of Christ” (2 Cor 12:9) and “the all-surpassing power of God” (2 Cor 4:7) works through him, Milosz understands his poetic vocation as being merely an instrument in the service of Poetry: “I am no more than a secretary of the invisible thing/ That is dictated to me and a few others./ Secretaries, mutually unknown, we walk the earth/ Without much comprehension. Beginning a phrase in the middle/ Or ending it with a comma. And how it all looks when completed/ Is not up to us to inquire, we won’t read it anyway.” (“Secretaries”<sup>79</sup>) Therefore, the poet must confess, because he needs to understand the meaning of his own life and the meaning of Being. This is what poets are for. And there is no other way to fulfill this task, but to move beyond literary conventions. Therefore, poetry is and must be a confession.

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<sup>78</sup> Cf. Milosz, “To Raja Rao”: “Greece had to lose, her pure consciousness/ had to make our agony only more acute./ We needed God loving us in our weakness/ and not in the glory of beatitude.” Ibidem, p. 254.

<sup>79</sup> Milosz 2001, p. 343.

Given the essential tension between powerlessness and power of language and human suffering of the poet unable to deal with reality, the witness of poetry given by the poet is incommensurate with the witness of poetry given by poetry itself.

## Conclusion

Among many characteristics of human beings, *homo sapiens, ludens, faber, emptor, adorans, ridens, necans, homo quaerens* in particular, expresses that we are truly a searching, exploring, seeking, questing, investigating, and deliberating species. In our searches, we examine, differentiate, and choose. But we also know that despite our most honorable and laborious efforts, the truth of life will remain hidden; not because we are not working hard enough to disclose it, but because we are humans and our understanding will be always provisional and open to further interpretation. Poetry does not offer a simple and successful *modus operandi* in terms of reaching certain goals, but promises to us to be a witness and companion in our life-long search for our personal identity.

Thinking about oneself always occurs where one is situated. From there, everything else begins and receives its particularity excavated out of the universal human struggle for meaning. Poetry proves to be an indefatigable advocate for the dignity of every human being, and as such is an indispensable companion on the journey toward oneself, testifying to faith and hope overshadowed by darkness. It reminds us that the poetic voice cannot be silenced by any human authority: “You who have harmed a simple man/ Laughing at his wrongs.../ Do not feel safe. The poet remembers./ Though you may kill him – a new one /will be born.” (“You Who Have Wronged”<sup>80</sup>)

Poetry is a witness and a participant in the transformation which happens within the individual search for one’s own identity. What is essential for us, is the discovery of truth about ourselves. But even this discovery is not something permanent. On the contrary, the more we understand about ourselves, the more remains still to be discovered: “To believe you are magnificent. And gradually to discover that you are not magnificent./ Enough labor for one human life.” (“Learning”<sup>81</sup>)

The poetic world is a world of unpredictability, insecurity, and even despair. It is often a radical uncertainty regarding who we are, which demonstrates itself as an acute form of disorientation in the world. At the same time, it is a world of hope, trust, and confidence.<sup>82</sup> Reading Milosz, we cannot help but remember

<sup>80</sup> Ibidem, p. 103.

<sup>81</sup> Milosz 1998, p. 60.

<sup>82</sup> “Evil grows and bears fruit, which is understandable, because it has logic and probability on its side and also, of course, strength. The resistance of tiny kernels of good, to which no one

that searching for our personal identity is the existential imperative. Already, in *Native Realm: A Search for Self-Definition*, he identified indispensability of love for his self-understanding:

It may be that we Eastern Europeans have been given the lead in this search. By choosing, we had to give up some values for the sake of others, which is the essence of tragedy. Yet only such an experience can whet our understanding so that we see old truth in a new light: when ambition counsels us to lift ourselves above simple moral rules guarded by the poor in spirit, rather than to choose them as our compass needle amid the uncertainties of change, we stifle the only thing that can redeem our follies and mistakes: love.<sup>83</sup>

Living in the physical exile, however beautiful and affluent as in his house overlooking San Francisco Bay, Milosz never forgets that being “an exiled writer – a stranger for whom the physical exile is really a reflection of a metaphysical, or even religious, spiritual exile” (*Nobel Lecture*) is not something reserved for his personal life story, but applies to humanity in general. It is a constant struggle to recognize what is foreign within, and what is proper in one’s own self-understanding. The task for an individual is to re-think one’s own past in order to discover the new horizons of meaning. There is something truly mysterious about commemorating past struggles. In the search for personal identity, this commemoration becomes the embodied transformation. Milosz makes us aware of the imminent danger inherent in the powerful illusion of full knowledge of oneself. Instead of asking questions, the illusion supplies definitive answers to all questions. Unfortunately, most of those unequivocal and authoritarian answers remind us of running around in a circle and repeating a few pious formulas widely accepted by the given political, social, and religious Magisterium.

On our way to achieving a more significant understanding of what it means to be a human being, we realize that we are essentially embedded in the world. The self can think only insofar as it thinks in the world. With reference to the poet’s vocation, Milosz is tirelessly searching for the source of poetic inspiration. He wants to thematize what makes a human being a poet and links this search with the more primordial question of what makes us human beings

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grants the power of causing far-reaching consequences, is entirely mysterious, however. Such seeming nothingness not only lasts but contains within itself enormous energy which is revealed gradually.” Milosz 2002, p. 70.

<sup>83</sup> Milosz 1968, p. 293. Cf. Milosz, “Love”: “Love means to look at yourself/ The way one looks at distant things/ For you are only one thing among many./ And whoever sees that way heals his heart,/ Without knowing it, from various ills/ A bird and a tree say to him: Friend.” Milosz 2001, p. 50.

*who* we are. The poetic reflection on what it means to exist in the world offers some essential insights on what it means to be a human being. In a poetic world, there is an essential interdependence of imagination and reality. If we understand poetry as the revelation of Being and at the same time as a revelation of human Da-sein, then the world we live in is open to infinite interpretations. The beauty of the imperfection of the task of interpretation seems to be the most rewarding experience in living life as *existentia hermeneutica*. Each poem can be read and reinvented in as many ways as there are readers, and each act of reading is a participation in the creation of the meaning of Being.

With untiring energy throughout his long and accomplished life, Milosz presents poetry to us as the closest friend in our journey to ourselves. By making itself manifest in our life, its voice is never fixed. Rather, it invites us to ponder the meaning of everything. And as in a conversation, it encourages us to move, to reposition ourselves, to change (*con-version*), to see always anew, and to fall in love as for the first time.

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CZŁOWIEK I DYLEMATY BYCIA.  
POEZJA CZESŁAWA MIŁOSZA I POSZUKIWANIA SWOJEGO JA

Streszczenie

Ujęcie poezji Czesława Miłosza w perspektywie lektury rozumiejącej pozwala nie tylko odkrywać sekretne przejścia do znaczeń poetyckiej wypowiedzi, lecz także określać jej swoistość w relacji do rzeczywistości. Poetyckie refleksje wokół ludzkiej egzystencji (doświadczenia istnienia i z istnieniem) wiodą czytelnika w stronę estetyczno-etycznych tropów, w stronę humanistycznego wymiaru liryki. Jeśli też poezję rozumie się jako objawianie Bytu i równocześnie objawianie ludzkiego *Da-sein*, wtedy świat, w którym żyjemy, jest także otwarty na nieskończoność interpretacji, na różnorodność ścieżek czytania i odczytywania wiersza, jego „życia” w interpretacji i w życiu czytelnika (*existentia hermeneutica*). Skoro też każdy akt czytania uczestniczy w tworzeniu znaczeń Bytu, to – z punktu widzenia Czesława Miłosza – poezja staje się najlepszym przyjacielem w naszej podróży w głąb samych siebie. Jest więc zaproszeniem do nieustannego poszukiwania znaczeń, zachętą do rozmowy, gotowością do zmiany (*con-version*) myślenia i spojrzenia, jakby rzeczy zobaczyło się po raz pierwszy.