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THE HYMN AS A THEME AND GENRE IN THE CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ'S WORK

Hymnic genre awareness in Czesław Miłosz's poetry is included into metadiscursive statements. Poetic self-commentary often leads to encapsulating the entire work in the hymnic genre. The hymn becomes an identification of the author's poetic and develops into a literary type. Is there a nonthematized hymn in this poetry and, if so, in what way can it exist? From his debut until *Last poems* Miłosz is observed to carry out a long-lasting process of codification of the qualities of hymnic expression which is being accomplished in a constant dialogue with the forms already attested. Referring to the analysis of metatextual statements found in Miłosz's poetic texts, the article concludes that the use of the term in question goes beyond its narrow literary genetics meaning. The presence of the hymnic code is seen as one of the elements which unites Miłosz's literary output. Miłosz's notion of hymn crosses the limits of his poetics. Hymnicity, then, stems from experiencing the sacred but is primarily viewed as an existential project.

Keywords: Czesław Miłosz, Hymn, hymnicity, Genre

Awareness of the hymn as a specific verse type is evident in numerous utterances contained in Miłosz's poems. We can find almost thirty such metadiscursive statements relating directly to the hymn form¹. Most importantly, the

¹ Abbreviation refers to Czesław Miłosz. 2006. *Wiersze ostatnie*. Zebrała, przepisała i datowanie ustaliła A. Kosińska. Kraków: Znak. The following abbreviations refer to other Polish editions of volumes of poetry by Miłosz: MD = *Druga przestrzeń*, Kraków: Znak, 2002; MN = *Na brzegu rzeki*, Kraków: Znak, 1994; MT = *To*, Kraków: Znak, 2000; MW-1 = *Wiersze*, vol. 1, Kraków: Znak, 1993; MW-2 = *Wiersze*, vol. 2; MW-3 = *Wiersze*, vol. 3. Digits following these abbreviations indicate page numbers; in the case of *Wiersze* volumes 1, 2 and 3, the first digit after the hyphen indicates the volume number and the following one the page number. Published English translations are given where they exist. Translations are taken mostly from Czesław Miłosz. 2001. *New and Collected Poems 1931–2001*. London: Allen Lane, hereafter NACP, followed by page number. Translations are by Czesław Miłosz and Robert Hass, unless otherwise stated in a footnote. As this is a more complete collection than Czesław Miłosz. 2011. *Selected and Last Poems 1931–2004*, New York: HarperCollins, it has been preferred. The latter contains however *Last Poems* (translated by Anthony Miłosz) and will therefore be used for poems from this final collection, although *nota bene* the lines of self-commentary quoted above do not appear in the translated volume; the translation here is mine. Please note also that the order of the poems in *Last Poems* differs from that of the Polish 2006 edition. Translations of poems from *Druga przestrzeń* are from Czesław Miłosz. 2004. *Second Space: New Poems*. Translated by the Author and Robert Hass. New York: Ecco, hereafter SS, followed by page number.

poet's self-commentary often strives to encompass the totality of his work within a hymnic space; within this framework the hymn becomes a recognizable sign of the author's poetics, assuming, in fact, the status of a generic category, superior to the formally diverse utterances of individual lines. In this sense, Miłosz could be seen as borrowing from Ancient Greece, where "the term 'hymn' was used in two senses: both in the narrower sense of a type or sub-category of verse, and in the broader sense of a genre," and when the "generic" application of the term *hymnos* referred in its original meaning to "practically every genre of archaic poetic creativity practiced in the epoch." With time the generic meaning of the word *hymnos* became more and more confined to "lyric songs of praise" (Danielewicz 1977: 36). The unifying and at the same time totalizing role of the hymn, embracing the whole of Miłosz's work and defining the essence of his poetic experience of the world, may be seen very clearly in one of his last poems, entitled "Heaven" ("Niebo"), where the initial lines of the closing stanza refer to the personal life of the poet, the lyric subject of the utterance, as having been on a bodily "long journey among people" (MW 69)².

The question arises: how, in fact, should the concept of *hymn* be understood in relation to all the metadiscursive statements and direct signals found in Miłosz's verse that suggest affiliation to a particular type or genre?—and how especially, against this background, are other ways of invoking the hymnic tradition realized? Does the hymn exist in this poetry in a non-systemicized form—and if so, how?³ Between the poem "Hymn" from *Three Winters* and the *Last Poems* we can observe in Miłosz's poetry an extended process of codification, for his own use, of the properties of the hymnic utterance. Clearly, such self-codification is carried out in constant dialogue with codifications that have already been attested historically—against the background of these, it becomes understandable and significant. On the one hand, Miłosz's hymn takes shape against a background of non-hymns: screams, blasphemies, complaints, accusations, lamentations, laments. On the other hand, the poet's hymnic space develops through the appropriation and subordination to its own needs of other, related types of verse, including when they appear to be incapable in a given moment of realization. In the poem "Not this Way" ("Nie tak"), for example, "the hymn or psalm [...] falls apart" (MW 2-2, 240; NACP 273).⁴ In "Titanic" ("Tytanik") the orchestra "plays a prayer-hymn" (MW-3, 281). Meanwhile in *Treatise on Theology (Traktat teologiczny)* Mickiewicz's "Ode to Youth" ("Oda do młodości") is called a "Freemasonic hymn" ("hymn masoński," MD 75; SS 56). Even the mystery play written by his relative Oskar Miłosz is described by the poet in "Second Space" as a "hymn to the glory of God and man" (MD 97; SS 76). In Czesław

² Miłosz, *Last Poems*, 298–299.

³ The hymn is obviously not the only type of verse or literary genre thematized by Miłosz. The problem of the "thematization of genealogical problems" is discussed by Józef Olejniczak in his article "Gatunek jako temat (przykład Czesława Miłosza)" in Włodzimierz Bolecki and Ireneusz Opacki, eds. 2000. *Genologia dzisiaj*. Warsaw: Instytut Badań Literackich Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2000, 67–76.

⁴ Translation by Czesław Miłosz and Lillian Vallee.

Miłosz's genealogical project, the hymn also has to fulfil an important mission in relation to the whole of literature. Through analogy with questions about the artist's redemption and the place of his work in this plan, we can see how it is precisely the hymn that forms the basis of and justifies all literary efforts and intentions that arise, as we recall, "under the control of the will" (MW 7). The protagonist of "Biography of an Artist" ("Biografia artysty") from the volume *Facing the River* (*Na brzegu rzeki*) was "Just not concerned, he promised his soul to Hell,/ Provided that his work remained clear and pure" (MN 24; NACP 604). In *Private Duties* (*Prywatne obowiązki*), when the artist is confronted by his dependency described in this way, a more directly expressed doubt appears: "It is said that we do not deserve Hell, because our work atones for our guilt, but perhaps that is yet another sentimental prejudice."⁵ In the literary order then, the hymn occupies a position analogous to a work which, in the order of the artist's life, "atones for guilt"; because his hope and task is to compensate for his distancing, for his elevation of himself above reality, and also for his alliance with the "cold heart" and the "cold, exacting approach"—of which we may be persuaded when we read, for example, the question posed in the poem "Caffè Greco" from *Chronicles* (*Kroniki*):

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

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

O hymn, O palinode, melopoea,
 Sing with my lips, you stop and I perish! (MW-3, 321; 505)⁶

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

⁵ Miłosz, *Prywatne obowiązki*, 138.

⁶ The of spellings of *melopoeia* and *melopoea* are transcribed here exactly as they appear in the published volume—Trans.

other living creatures.” (Sarbiewski 1954: 246–247). The hymn was therefore the domain above all of poet-theologians. As Artur Hutnikiewicz observes:

The idea of the hymn is thus also associated since earliest times with the idea of the sacred and the sublime as well as with awareness of the organic link between this type of writing and a religious cult. (Hutnikiewicz 1973: 39)⁷

On the other hand, the poetic hymn which appeared during the Renaissance era and which lacked in subsequent periods any close connection with problems of the sacred, “approximates (provisionally) to those other types of lyric that express praise, such as the ode, paean or dithyramb” according to some dictionary definitions (Semczuk 1992: 399). But in ancient times, hymnic creativity—according to Jerzy Schnayder—“is difficult to grasp, since hymns acquired with time a variety of different names (like dithyrambs, paeans, prosody)” (Schnayder 1960: 141). Crucial difficulties also arise when distinguishing between the hymn and the prayer, a distinction which has become somewhat blurred since mediaeval times and often led to their complete identification within, of course, the general designation of religious lyric. As Jan Józef Lipski concludes, “sometimes, as we know, it is difficult to distinguish the hymn *sensu stricto* from the prayer, the elevated religious or patriotic song, or the ode [...]” (Lipski 1975: 221). A similar thing could be said of the distinction between the hymn and the psalm. “The psalm is focused on God, it is a hymn of praise,” writes Father Józef Sadzik in his preface to Miłosz’s Polish translation (from Hebrew) of the *Book of Psalms (Księga Psalmów)*.⁸ The “harmony of psalms and hymns” (MT 63) is also mentioned in Miłosz’s poem “Zdziechowski” (MT 63; NACP 715), in a passage where the poet alludes to the works of this philosopher and former rector of Vilnius University. Another theoretical problem, pointed out by Lipski among others, is the difficulty of distinguishing between the ode and the hymn, while in English-language dictionaries “there is a tendency,” according to Lipski, “to define the hymn as a particular type of ode.” (Lipski 1975: 235). In German theory, there appears the term “hymnic ‘lyric of ascent’” which includes the ode and the dithyramb.⁹ In this context, the synonymous uses of various kinds of generic terminology to describe verse types in Miłosz’s poems cited above—the psalm-hymn, prayer-hymn or even ode-hymn— come as no surprise; while amongst the poet’s output we also find odes, as well as numerous references to precisely this generic designation.¹⁰ Also, “Dithyramb” (“Dytyramb”) occurs twice

⁷ On the genetic link between the hymn and religious cults, see also: E. Sawrymowicz. 1946. “Hymn jako gatunek literacki.” *Zagadnienia Literackie* 3: 77-78.

⁸ Józef Sadzik. 2003. “O ‘Psalmach’.” In Czesław Miłosz. *Księgi biblijne. Przekłady z języka greckiego i hebrajskiego*. Kraków: Znak, 32.

⁹ According to Lipski, the term “Lyrik des Aufschwungs” was introduced by the theorist Friedrich Theodor Fischer.

¹⁰ See Zbigniew Łapiński. 1985. “Oda i inne gatunki oświecone.” In Jerzy Kwiatkowski. *Poznawanie Miłosza. Studia i szkice o twórczości poety*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 446-457.

as the title of a poem—the first time in 1938, the second in the 1965 collection *Bobo's Metamorphosis* (*Gucio zaczarowany*)—a term that in antique definitions refers to a type of verse explained with the aid of the word *hymnos*, which represents a “specialized” type of hymn and yet acknowledges the “superiority of the hymn” over them (Danielewicz 1986: 43).

On the basis of an analysis of the metatextual statements contained in Miłosz's poetical texts, especially those where the type designation “hymn” occurs, we may conclude that his use of this designation exceeds or transcends its narrow generic meaning. The poet admits to “having composed hymns in honour of [...] Everything” (MW 69),¹¹ while he describes the totality of his poetic output as “hymns of gratitude” (MW 7). In so doing he acknowledges to some extent the archaic synonymity between the scope covered by the concept of *hymnos* and poetic creativity in general, yet he certainly uses the term as a single denoting genre, in accordance with the earliest Greek tradition, but also surely on the insistence of theoretical and practical problems surrounding the hymn contemporary to himself. The question then arises as to how this consciousness—which can be established on the basis of the authorial “self-commentaries” internal to his verse, and which, thus, possess the value of theoretical reflections inscribed into the poetry itself, and are even expressed along the lines of a genealogical manifesto—finds confirmation in the hymnographic textual practice of the author of *Unattainable Earth* (*Nieobojęta ziemia*). Discussing the relationship between Miłosz's original poetry and his translations of the Bible, in particular his translations of the Psalms, Jan Błoński (in 1983) noticed his practical fulfilment of the linguistic rules of the hymn on the stylistic level:

In the lexis, syntax, increased use of metonymy, transformations in the idea of poetry (its literariness)—a high hymnic style is constructed, with which the name of the poet will surely be permanently associated. (Błoński 1998:212).

This style, according to the understanding presented here, transcends questions of exclusively biblical stylization—even though such stylization has been thought through at the very deepest level—or the effects of the “radiation of an ancient text” (Błoński 1998: 212), even if we accept that biblical translations can fulfil the function of a “poetic laboratory” and thus be what they were, for example, for Jan Kochanowski working on his *Psalter of David* (*Psalterz Dawidów*). Suggesting an affinity that goes beyond style between the collections *City Without a Name* (*Miasto bez imienia*, 1969) and *From the Rising of the Sun* (*Gdzie wschodzi słońce i kędy zapada*, 1974) and Miłosz's *Book of Psalms*, Błoński asks more tentatively, albeit penetratingly: “is it not precisely this that would appear to be the general tendency in Miłosz's mature work?” (Błoński 1998: 212). When Błoński was originally formulating these propositions, he could not have known, of course, of the seven subsequent books of poetry by the Nobel laureate which would

¹¹ Miłosz, *Last Poems*, 299.

confirm his (Błoński's) critical instincts, but which would also enable the scope for understanding hymnicity in Miłosz's work to be expanded. Towards the end of the 1990s, after new reading experiences, Błoński points to the scale of this expansion in a quite definite way:

His poetry—especially in the second half of his long life—is an unceasing hymn in praise of existence. But this hymn is sung by so many instruments and in so many different tonalities that the reader—having lost his or her way—often forgets about the object of the hymn in favour of the hymn itself. (Błoński 1998: 94)

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

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

Here a thought returns from one of Miłosz's much earlier texts "Reading the Japanese Poet Issa (1762–1826)" ("Czytając japońskiego poetę Issa (1762–1826)": "What is pronounced strengthens itself./ What is not pronounced tends to nonexistence" (MW-3, 28; NACP 350)—an idea that coincides moreover with the proposition of another great hymnist, Friedrich Hölderlin: "But what remains is founded by the poets."¹²

The generic meaning of the hymn, which manifests itself so powerfully in Miłosz's later poetry and is especially clearly expressed on the level of metadiscursive statements, requires an examination of its intertextual motivations. The question arises: is the word "hymn" merely an architextual metaphor, stubbornly persisting on the pages of successive volumes of poetry and deliberately archaizing the status of poetry and the poet; or does it also, apart from these functions, open up some kind of wider "*field of genealogical reference*" [my emphases—D.P.] (Balbus 2000: 19–32, 27)? Hence I am interested in the references made in Miłosz's texts to the

¹² "Was bleibt aber, stiften die Dichter." The statement forms the last line of Hölderlin's poem *Remembrance* (*Andenken*). Translation is from Martin Heidegger. 2000. *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*. Translated with an Introduction by Keith Hoeller. Amhurst, New York: Humanity Books, 105. The phrase is also invoked by Józef Sadzik in his discussion of the connections between Miłosz's ideas and Heidegger (*Inne niebo, inna ziemia*), in Czesław Miłosz. 2000. *Ziemia Ulro*. Kraków: Znak, 21. Sadzik's text also appears in the Instytut Literacki (Paris) edition of *Ziemia Ulro* (1977).

hermeneutic space of the hymn in its narrower understanding as a genre, as well as in the identification, precisely within this field, of diverse indexes of genealogical references existing in his poems. I am therefore adopting for the purposes of my further reflections, a direction contrary to the one that has been binding us so far. From uncovering the expanding semantic capacity of the concept of the hymn in the poetry under discussion, I wish to move to tracing concrete textual manifestations which point to the hymn as a literary genre. Accumulating generalized data and deducing from it the closeness of the hymn to other genres, must now be replaced by the need to establish a “genealogical grammar” specific to the hymn and by an examination of the ways in which it is potentially applied by Miłosz. Because of the theoretical difficulties already mentioned in relation to the hymn, as well as its many-branched history, we should begin with a survey of how the genre was perceived in twentieth-century consciousness. Crucial to this perception is the question of the declining role of formal construction, and as a result of this, of the lack of any possibility of verifying a given, or merely putative generic qualification that depends on a paradigm of construction. Rather a unanimous view seems to prevail that the hymn has become “above all a semantic sign suggesting to the reader a particular type of reception, and referring to the sacred traditions of the genre,” (Semczuk 1992: 400) which would also include the sacralization of different objects of poetic expression, or the “constant expansion of the concept of the sacred” thus allowing “almost any theme or content that the author feels to be of crucial value or momentous importance to be recognized as an object suitable for hymnic treatment.” (Hutnikiewicz 1973: 41). Faced with the unreliability of formal and thematic criteria,¹³ the poet's own gesture becomes decisive in relation to other propositions—the poet, for whom the very choice of the hymn “is a manifestation to some extent of an ideological position, since its salient feature is the position of the lyric subject, who sees the world as a binary structure based on the opposition between the sacred and the profane.” (Lipski 1975: 236). This distinguishing feature remains in accord with the Greek inheritance. Approaching that inheritance with philological precision, Hans Georg Gadamer insisted that a distinction should be made between “praise,” in the sense of a eulogy, expressing approval (Polish: “pochwała”), and “glorification” (Polish: “wysławiania”)—and also what stems from this: namely the distinction between a poem expressing praise and a hymn, because “anyone is not free to praise anyone”; “on the other hand, glorification, like the hymn whose form it is, recognizes something that is absolutely superior, which transcends us and whose presence fulfils us.” (Gadamer 2001: 33).

The recurrence of the hymnic code is one of the overall unifying factors in Miłosz's poetry. Points of reference to this code are scattered throughout his work in many different places, and operate with varying degrees of intensity. They take many forms, often provoking semantic interaction with other genealogical fields. In addition to these dispersed points of reference unifying his writing into some kind

¹³ Hutnikiewicz compiles a list of eight possibilities; see *Hymny Jana Kasprowicza*, 43–44.

of hymnic whole, as well as similarly scattered references to the hermeneutic space of the poet's preferred genre, we encounter in Miłosz's volumes of poetry, texts which demand to be called hymns in the more precise sense of the term, trying to realize themselves in the classicist way, as proper generic paradigms. One of the best known and most frequently commented upon is the poem "Hymn" from *Three Winters*.

The notion of the hymn in Miłosz's poetry transcends the boundaries of poetics. For hymnicity arises out of the experience of the sacred, "of what transcends us," which determines the position of the poet and at the same time names the experience itself. Independently of its formal and artistic meanings, it provides succour for the eschatological imagination.

Hymnicity appears above all, however, as an existential project, an imperative of existence, a life model. Miłosz's "life in hymn" reminds us again of Hölderlin and his famous line "yet poetically, man dwells on this earth."

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

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