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“Old Lecher, it’s Time for You to the Grave...” – Late Elegies (?) by Czesław Miłosz

The volume *To [This]* by Czesław Miłosz was published in 2000, when the poet was eighty-nine years old. I took the quote used in the title of my essay from the poem “An Honest Description of Myself with a Glass of Whiskey at An Airport, Let Us Say, in Minneapolis.” The poem begins as follows:

My ears catch less and less of conversations, and my eyes have weakened,
though they are still insatiable.

I see their legs in miniskirts, slacks, wavy fabrics.

Peep at each one separately, at their buttocks and thighs, lulled by the
imaginings of porn.

Old lecher, it’s time for you to the grave, not to the games and amusements
of youth.¹

I chose both the quote and the poem, as well as the second part of the title of my article, deliberately. I think it is a representative piece of Miłosz’s late poetry, written, let us say, in the last five years of the past century and

¹ C. Miłosz, “An Honest Description of Myself with a Glass of Whiskey at An Airport, Let Us Say, in Minneapolis,” translated by C. Miłosz and R. Hass, in: idem, *New and Collected Poems 1931–2001*, London etc. 2005, p. 679.

the first years of the present century. Perhaps not in all these works, but certainly in this particular poem one can find themes, images, motifs, and a specific ironic style that have become a hallmark of the “old Miłosz.” I will explain this opinion later in this essay.

In the title, I “promise” to deal with Miłosz’s “late elegies” here. So I should start my argument with this genre qualification. Because – you can probably accuse me of this – it is not the elegies I will be writing about here. Elegy as a literary genre originated in ancient Greece, emerged from lamenting lyrics and funeral songs, was sung at funerals, and its verse form (specifically the elegiac couplet) was probably its only distinguishing feature.² In the 20th century, elegies can be found in the works of poets of such caliber as Rainer Maria Rilke, Wystan Hugh Auden, Władysław Broniewski, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, and – as the authors of the *Dictionary of Literary Genres* point out – Czesław Miłosz, Zbigniew Herbert, and Mieczysław Jastrun.³ They write that:

in the modern understanding, an elegy [...] is a lyrical work with serious content, which is reflective and maintained in the tone of despair, and which combines personal and metaphysical problems (the rules of fate, evanescence, death, or love).⁴

So, if Miłosz’s name appears in an entry as that of the creator of 20th-century elegies, this information certainly does not apply to the poems I will be writing about here, which come from the volumes *To [This]* (2000) and *Second Space* (Polish edition 2002, English edition 2004). I believe that the authors of the *Dictionary* included Miłosz in their definition because of the poem *Elegy* which comes from *Trzy zimy* [Three Winters] (1936), and the poem *Elegy for N. N.*, written in 1963, from *Gdzie wschodzi słońce i kędy zapada* [Where the Sun Rises and Where it Sets] (1974). The gap between these “elegies” and the poems of the late 20th and early 21st century is as great as the difference between the poet’s attitude to the literary genre

² Cf. M. Głowiński et al., *Słownik terminów literackich* [Dictionary of literary terms], Wrocław 1998, p. 117.

³ See: M. Bernacki, M. Pawlus, *Słownik gatunków literackich* [Dictionary of literary genres], Bielsko-Biała 1999, p. 53.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 53; my emphasis.

before the middle of the past century and at its end, as the gap that separates *Three Winters* from *This* and *Second Space*.⁵ Those "elegies" (from 1936 and 1963), contrary to their titles, are not "elegies" according to dictionary definitions. The poems I will discuss here, including the piece quoted at the beginning, are elegies, or more precisely, they enter into a fundamental dispute with the tradition of the genre.

A definition of a 20th-century elegy that is even more "capacious" than that provided by the authors of the *Dictionary* is proposed by Roman Doktor. Writing about the four "elegies" by Józef Czechowicz, he pointed out that:

he had stayed among poets close to him ideologically, such as Julian Przyboś, Aleksander Wat, Marian Piechal, Stefan Napierski, and Czesław Miłosz, but also among poets with different views: Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, Antoni Słonimski, Julian Tuwim, Jan Lechoń, and others.

Then he formulated the following opinion:

Why was elegy such a popular genre during that period [the interwar period – J. O.]? [...] Elegy was not based on overly rigorous assumptions. It did not have to fear the infantilism of the idyll or the pathos of the ode, although this genre was also present in the poetry of that period. To this day, it is a capacious genre in terms of subject matter and is fairly homogeneous in mood.

After all, by nature, poetry enjoys the atmosphere of reflection and nostalgia, and a sense of loss and of the passing of the world into oblivion that permeates our souls. This is basically how 20th-century elegies function. No formal considerations are important. The essence of the genre is determined by the conventionality of its melancholic mood and the sense of loss of some value. Sometimes there are also certain peculiar semantic preferences for such words as grief, sadness, suffering, tears, pain, and parting.⁶

⁵ I have written on Miłosz's attitude to literary genres elsewhere, see: J. Olejniczak, "Gatunek jako temat (Przykład Czesława Miłosza)" [The genre as a topic (An example of Czesław Miłosz)], in: W. Bolecki, I. Opacki, eds., *Genologia dzisiaj* [Genology today], Wrocław 2000, pp. 67–76.

⁶ J. Doktor, "Elegie Czechowicza" [Czechowicz's elegies], in: J. Świąch, ed., *Józef Czechowicz. Od awangardy do nowoczesności* [Józef Czechowicz. From avant-garde to modernity], Lublin 2004, pp. 97–98.

As can be seen from these cursory descriptions of 20th-century “elegies” recalled here, in the poetic practice of the past century, the rigors of the genre were fundamentally “loosened” and “diluted.” All the cited researchers agree that the formal determinants (“elegiac couplet”?) no longer apply, and therefore the requirements that remain concern the topic and the mood. Melancholy, metaphysics and “a sense of loss and of the passing of the world into oblivion” are sufficient characteristics for a piece of poetry to be “nominated” as an elegy. The matter is complicated, however, because the awareness of the decline of the genre paradigm of the elegy has its own romantic tradition – it was discussed already by Kazimierz Brodziński.⁷ Ireneusz Opacki also pointed this out in his excellent interpretation of Juliusz Słowacki’s poem “On the Bringing of the Ashes of Napoleon.”⁸

Irony does not fit elegy, neither does “low” or colloquial style, or its elements, nor, I believe, eroticism. In the Eros-Thanatos opposition, the elegy situates itself on the side of death. Love can, admittedly, be the topic of an elegy, but not in its somatic, bodily aspect. An elegy is on the side of maturity, experience, and old age; sometimes it is a contemplation of passing... The subject of an elegy is a melancholic person, and so is its style (tone?)... The subject of an elegy gazes at the irretrievably lost past... All of these elements are challenged, even negated in “An Honest Description of Myself”! So what features of elegy remain in Miłosz’s poem? Paradoxically, it is an element that has been rejected by modern elegies: the verse structure! In *An Honest Description of Myself*,” he uses the couplet, which admittedly is “broken” in the second stanza (shortened to one line) and in the last stanza (extended to three lines). All other determinants of elegy are negated in this piece; not coincidentally, the oppositions are sharp,

⁷ See: K. Brodziński, “O elegii” [On elegy], in: idem, *Pisma estetyczno-krytyczne* [Aesthetic and critical writings], compiled by A. Łucki, vol. 1, Warsaw 1934, pp. 321–330.

⁸ See: I. Opacki, “Odwrócona elegia (‘Na sprowadzenie prochów Napoleona’ Juliusza Słowackiego)” [A reversed elegy (Juliusz Słowacki’s “On the Bringing of the Ashes of Napoleon”)], in: idem, *Odwrócona elegia. O przenikaniu się postaci gatunkowych w poezji* [A reversed elegy. On the interpenetration of genre forms in poetry], Katowice 1999, pp. 161–190.

polar: Thanatos–Eros, old age–praise of youth, melancholy–irony... And yet, after all, there is an elegiac element in the poem. The autobiographical subject⁹ – the “old poet” – reflects on the passing of time:

But I do what I have always done: compose scenes of this earth under orders from the erotic imagination.

It's not that I desire these creatures precisely; I desire everything, and they are like a sign of ecstatic union.

It's not my fault that we are made so, half from disinterested contemplation, half from appetite.

In this gesture he is identical to Miłosz – the author of the preface to the series *For Heraclitus* from the volume *Kroniki* [Chronicles] (1988):

The mystery of the shifting of each “today” into “yesterday,” the disappearance of each “is” replaced by “was,” the river bank on which we stand, watching the current carry away the familiar sights, but also ourselves deluding ourselves that we are standing on the bank. And since this is the fate of all of us, also in the face of the power of time any differences capable of dividing us disappear, and a sense of elementary human togetherness must resound. [...]

The story of my century has been forming in my head for decades, but with no illusions about the possibility of encapsulating it in some romance with a colorful cover. Frames of a huge film simply came back running one after another and called for any of them to be stopped. This stopping was largely what my poetry relied on. I am not sure whether it is the best instrument for this, but I had no other, since I was not tempted by the profession of novelist.¹⁰

But also the topos of the “old poet” is broken here, because, after all, the barely indicated motif of saying goodbye to the world and creativity is “overshadowed” in the poem by greed, insatiability, as well as erotic desire:

⁹ I think that describing the subject of “An Honest Description” as “autobiographical” is justified by a number of elements of the poem, all of which are intertextual and referring to Miłosz's earlier works. Even the lyrical situation in this poem is a lyrical counterpart to the narrative situation of many passages of *A Year of the Hunter*.

¹⁰ C. Miłosz, *Kroniki* [Chronicles], Cracow 1988, pp. 30, 31.

the ears hearing less and less and the weakening eyes are still insatiable and “peep” at beautiful young women passing by, and the subject is “lulled by the imaginings of porn”...

In the penultimate couplet, there is a vision of Heaven, where “[...] it must [...] be as it is here,” and the subject will be “Changed into pure seeing...” and will

[...] absorb, as before, the proportions of human bodies, the color of irises, a Paris street in June at dawn, all of it incomprehensible, incomprehensible the multitude of visible things.

I would like to point out that the image of Heaven cited here, although in a different function, also appears in many other works of “late Miłosz,” which I once described as “birthday” works.¹¹ For example, in the commemorative piece “For my Eighty-Eight Birthday”:

And I, taken by youthful beauty,
 bodily, not durable,
 its dancing movement among ancient stones.
 [...]
 Long ago I left behind
 the visiting of cathedrals and fortified towers.
 I am like someone who just sees and doesn't pass away,
 a lofty spirit despite his gray head and the afflictions of age.¹²

I will now return to the question of genre. It is not spurious. Can poems from the last period of the work of the author of *The Land of Ulro*, such as: “An Honest Description of Myself with a Glass of Whiskey at An Airport, Let Us Say, in Minneapolis,” “For My Eighty-Eight Birthday,” “Poet at Seventy,” “Po osiemdziesiątce” [In my eighties], “W pewnym wieku” [At a certain

¹¹ See: J. Olejniczak, “Poeta dziewięćdziesięcioletni – Czesław Miłosz” [A ninety years old poet – Czesław Miłosz], in: T. Cieślak, K. Pietrych, eds., *Literatura polska 1990–2000* [Polish literature 1990–2000], vol. 1, Cracow 2002, pp. 61–78.

¹² C. Miłosz, “For My Eighty-Eight Birthday,” translated by C. Miłosz and R. Hass, in: idem, *New and Collected Poems 1931–2001*, p. 680.

age], and "A Prayer," be described as elegies? Or is their designation as belonging to this genre a path leading to an explanation of their deep meanings and the phenomenon of the vitality of the "old poet's" poems? I do not mean the vitality articulated in them directly: "Old lecher, it's time for you to the grave, not to the games and amusements of youth." I mean the phenomenal vitality of this poetry, its constantly evolving poetic language, its unremitting engagement with an increasingly alien world, and its constant capacity for delight in that world. "A more and more alien world" – Miłosz declared his attachment to pre-1914 Europe in many places; in the *Introduction to For Heraclitus*, he wrote:

As one can easily see, my imagination likes to turn to "La Belle Époque," to the time before 1914. Perhaps because all the people active at the time, both known and unknown to me, have died, so the story about them has the "color of eternity" right away. Or perhaps the closer the days of our modern disasters get to us, the more difficult it is to free the memory from the aches it does not want, from which it flees? Although there are probably other reasons for my interest. The 19th century, by no means idyllic, prepared the props for the show that was to begin soon; unfortunately, the symbolic knives, swords, and daggers were to prove all too real, and blood was used instead of red paint. So the moment of a stop, before the curtain was raised in 1914.¹³

But after all, with regard to the works of Miłosz, genre questions must be posed... They were "designed" by the poet himself with the two elements of his poetry: the large number of genre terms occurring in the titles of his works (besides elegy, these include song, hymn, lullaby, poem, parable, legend, treatise, prayer, ode, chronicle, notebook, epigraph, album, memoir, dialogue, biography, report, lecture, and meditation) and the bringing of the genre problem into the topic, with the longing for

[...] a more spacious form
that would be free from the claims of poetry or prose

¹³ Idem, *Kroniki* [Chronicles], p. 32.

and would let us understand each other without exposing the author or reader to sublime agonies¹⁴

– to recall a stanza from “Ars Poetica?”¹⁵ One has to ask, of course, what purpose does this condensation of genre terms in Miłosz’s poetry serve? How would he define the concept of genre, or perhaps which of the elements of the literary definition of genre was most significant in his poetic practice? I think that in addition to playing with the literary tradition – that of Romanticism and Enlightenment (Miłosz deliberately chooses a classical set of literary genres for his discourse with Romanticism and declares his attachment to the poetry of the 18th century, even if he rather calls Adam Mickiewicz the master of his poetry) – the most significant factor is the rhetorical value of the genre. The choice of a genre shapes the reception of the text and models the expectations of the audience.

So, when an over-eighty-year-old poet uses the motifs of saying goodbye to his work, old age, and death, when he poses metaphysical questions, when he uses the technique of self-portrait (“At a Certain Age,” “In My Eighties”), the expected tone of the poetic language is elegiac and the genre is elegy... But Miłosz radically reverses the order of elegy...

Are “An Honest Description of Myself with a Glass of Whiskey at An Airport, Let Us Say, in Minneapolis” and the other works by Miłosz mentioned here thus “reversed elegies,” as Opacki described “On the Bringing of the Ashes of Napoleon”? Would Miłosz’s gesture therefore be inherently romantic? Yes, but with one, albeit important, caveat – unlike in Słowacki’s

¹⁴ Idem, “Ars Poetica?”, translated by C. Miłosz and L. Vallee, in: idem: *New and Collected Poems 1931–2001*, p. 240.

¹⁵ See: J. Olejniczak, “Gatunek jako temat...” [The genre as a topic...]; R. Matuszewski, “Czesława Miłosza dążenie do formy pojemnej” [Czesław Miłosz’s pursuit of spacious form]; Z. Łapiński, “Oda i inne gatunki oświeceniowe” [Ode and other Enlightenment genres]; S. Balbus, “‘Pierwszy ruch jest śpiewanie’ (O wierszu Miłosza – rozpoznanie wstępne)” [“The first movement is singing” (On Miłosz’s poem – initial determination)], in: J. Kwiatkowski, ed., *Poznanawanie Miłosza. Studia i szkice o twórczości poety* [Recognizing Miłosz. Studies and sketches on the poet’s works], Cracow 1985; M. Zaleski, “Miłosz: piosenki niewinności i doświadczenia” [Miłosz: the songs of innocence and experience], *Teksty Drugie* 1991, no. 1/2, pp. 81–95; R. Nycz, *Sylwy współczesne. Problem konstrukcji tekstu* [Modern Silvae rerum. The problem of text structure], Wrocław 1984.

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poem, this "elegiac theater" in Miłosz's poem is about the poet himself, it is the experience of the subject – author... Who, since I have already referred to the context of Romantic poetry, is closer to the subject of Mickiewicz's *Lausanne Lyrics*.

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