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Our Language, Their Language. Once Again about the Text Variants of Czesław Miłosz's "Campo dei Fiori"

1.

"Campo dei Fiori" – "the best known, or at any rate the most frequently published poem by Czesław Miłosz,"¹ a work that is "well known, thoroughly interpreted, actually obvious,"² exists in the popular consciousness as a "great poem"³ that, in 1943, after the final liquidation of the Jewish ghetto before the eyes of the rest of the population of Warsaw, saved "the honor

¹ N. Gross, "Dzieje jednego wiersza" [The history of one poem], in: idem, *Poeci i Szoa. Obraz Zagłady Żydów w poezji polskiej* [Poets and Shoah. The image of the Holocaust in Polish poetry], Sosnowiec 1993, p. 84.

² P. Mitzner, "Słowa szukając na Campo di Fiori. Czesław Miłosz wobec kryzysu języka" [Looking for words at Campo de' Fiori. Czesław Miłosz facing the crisis of language], *Dialog* 2010, no. 1, p. 100.

³ B. Chrzęstowska, *Poezje Czesława Miłosza* [The poetry of Czesław Miłosz], 3rd ed., Warsaw 1998, p. 113.

of Polish literature.”⁴ Almost from the beginning, the poem became a kind of a monument that one admires, is proud of, and brings school tours and foreign visitors to see it, but it is impossible to talk to it. The author himself was not very keen on accepting the status of the work as a masterpiece, and a moral rather than a literary one at that. He once said about it that it was a poem “written about dying from the position of an observer,” which made it “very immoral.”⁵ This revisionist approach was adopted by the critic Jan Błoński when, in a well-known essay, he juxtaposed “Campo dei Fiori” with the poem “A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto” written almost at the same time, in which Miłosz swaps the safe role of an observer of tragic events for the position of a guilt-stricken witness of a crime.⁶

The internal dialogue going on in the poet’s works and self-commentaries, brought out and amplified by the critic, is very instructive, and nowadays probably only school reading of “Campo dei Fiori” is still possible – it must be said: unfortunately – without taking into account the complementary voice of “A Poor Christian.”

Interestingly, however, in “Campo dei Fiori” itself, one can discover an internal dialogue that contradicts the accusations raised against the poem – again, especially by the author himself – of its simplistic, unambiguously explicit, declarative character, and “journalistic” nature.⁷ It seems that since its birth in 1943 the poem has led in different directions and was subjected to clashing trends of meaning and worldview. Indirect evidence to this is its existence in two divergent, though nearly equal in age, versions. The first appeared anonymously in a collection of verse by various poets focused on the Holocaust, published clandestinely in Warsaw in April 1944 under the title *Z otchłani* [From the abyss]. It was later

⁴ A. Sandauer, *O sytuacji pisarza polskiego pochodzenia żydowskiego w XX wieku. (Rzecz, którą nie ja powinienem był napisać...)* [On the situation of a Polish writer of Jewish origin in the 20th century. (Something that someone else should have written...)], Warsaw 1982, p. 44.

⁵ [E. Czarnecka] R. Gorczyńska, *Podróżny świata. Rozmowy z Czesławem Miłoszem. Komentarze* [The world traveler. Conversations with Czesław Miłosz. Commentaries], Cracow 1992, pp. 58–59.

⁶ J. Błoński, “The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto”, *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* 2008, vol. 2. Such a comparison was made earlier by Sandauer (*On the Situation of a Polish Writer*, pp. 44–45).

⁷ [E. Czarnecka] R. Gorczyńska, *Podróżny świata* [The world traveler], p. 59.

reprinted in the United States as *Poezje ghetta* [Poetry of the ghetto] (1945), while after the war it was included in an anthology compiled by Michał M. Borwicz titled *Pieśń ujdzie cało* [The song will escape unharmed] (1947). The second version of the poem found its way into the initial issue of the monthly magazine *Twórczość* (dated August 1945) and a few months later was included with minimal changes in Miłosz's volume titled *Ocalenie* [Survival] (December 1945).

The fact that “Campo dei Fiori” existed in two versions was ignored for many years. It was finally noticed circa 1980 by David Weinfeld, one of the Hebrew translators of the poem, and his observation was followed by Natan Gross, who, by comparing several editions, discovered more than a dozen differences between them. In an emotional essay, Gross recounts the history of his search for the textual variants, argues with the poet about the most accurate form of the poem, and finally cites an excerpt from his correspondence with Miłosz, proving that the artist himself had been unaware of the existence of various versions of “Campo dei Fiori”:

What you wrote to me about “Campo dei Fiori” is a surprise to me [...]. It was a long time ago and the versions of the text have blurred in my memory. Perhaps the poem had several versions right away in 1943, one of which I gave for the anthology *From the Abyss*, where it first appeared. It is likely that there was a different version in the manuscript that survived, and that one was published in the volume *Survival* in 1945. I have never compared the different versions, which is why your conclusions from your close reading were so sensational...⁸

It seems that the poet's becoming aware of Gross's findings influenced the shape of the edition of the poem in the series of Miłosz's works published by the Znak publishing house, first in the *Wiersze* [Poems] in 1993 (ZW) and then in the *Dzieła zebrane* [Collected works] in 2001 (DZ).⁹ The latter publication, the last edition of “Campo dei Fiori” prepared with the

⁸ C. Miłosz, A letter to N. Gross; quoted after: N. Gross, “Dzieje jednego wiersza” [The history of one poem], p. 89.

⁹ List of abbreviations is at the end of the article. If not indicated otherwise, all the emphases in the quotations are mine.

poet's participation, is a kind of compromise between the variants of the text living separate lives until then.

This does not change the fact that for half a century "Campo dei Fiori" existed in two independent versions. In fact, it still exists that way, as interpreters and users of the poem, who operate at different levels and in different registers – from popular to specialized, from school to academic, in Poland and abroad – use one of the versions established in the mid-1940s. These versions, as Piotr Mitzner states, while being "radically different from the interpretive point of view," are not contradictory and complement each other.¹⁰ I will argue for an even more far-reaching proposition: "Campo dei Fiori" not only can be read, but even should be read as the sum of its two versions, because only by considering both versions of the poem it is possible to see the cracks in the poem's semantic structure and, paradoxically, thanks to this very fact, to understand the poem more deeply.

2.

In the appendix to the Polish version of this article (*Archiwum Emigracji* 2011, vol. 1–2), I provide a summary of the dissimilarities based on eleven textual witnesses of "Campo dei Fiori," organizing and complementing Natan Gross' observations. Mostly these are minor editorial alterations that are not worth discussing in detail here. However, two passages contain significant differences that change the perspective of the poem. Characteristically, the surviving manuscript of "Campo dei Fiori" shows work on the text in one of these spots – and only there; numerous deletions and corrections illustrate the path from a version resembling the first edition of the poem to a version close to the one the poet accepted at the end of his life.¹¹ Both passages, as Mitzner noted, deal with questions of language

¹⁰ P. Mitzner, "Słowa szukając na Campo di Fiori" [Looking for words at Campo de' Fiori], pp. 100, 101.

¹¹ The manuscript of "Campo dei Fiori," kept in Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Yale University (Czesław Miłosz Papers Series II. Writings, GEN MSS 661 Box 83 f. 1117), is not dated.

and possibility of expression, and thus not only with categories central to Miłosz's understanding of the essence of poetry and the poet's duty, but also with fundamental issues related to the literary representation of the Holocaust. Let us recall these fragments along with the critics' comments on their differences. The first passage deals with the death of Giordano Bruno. The version published in 1944 reads:

[...] kiedy Giordano	[...] when Giordano
Wstępował na rusztowanie	Climbed to his burning
<i>Nie było w ludzkim języku</i>	<i>There were no words</i>
Ani jednego wyrazu	In any human tongue
Aby coś zdołał powiedzieć	To be left for mankind, [verbatim: so that he could say something to]
Ludzkości, która zostaje.	Mankind who live on.
(ZO)	(SP)

The 1945 version, which coincides with the manuscript, reads:

[...] kiedy Giordano	[...] when Giordano
Wstępował na rusztowanie,	Climbed to his burning
<i>Nie znalazł w ludzkim języku</i>	<i>He found no words</i>
Ani jednego wyrazu,	In any human tongue
<i>Aby nim ludzkość pożegnać,</i>	<i>To bid farewell to mankind,</i>
Tę ludzkość, która zostaje.	Mankind who live on.
(O)	(SP, modified)

Gross commented on the change:

I find it difficult to accept this reduction of the image and the feeling. After all, it is [...] about the symbol and the parallel – and what was said in the first part (about Giordano) also applies to the second part (about the disappearing ghetto) – and vice versa. There (in the burning ghetto), too, “there were no words in any human tongue” to describe the crime taking place.¹²

¹² N. Gross, “Dzieje jednego wiersza” [The history of one poem], p. 87.

For Mitzner, too, this is a manifestation of a “weakening of the radicalism of own first thought”: “in the earlier version, Miłosz expresses a more radical view of language in which there are no appropriate words, and in the later version he softens it with the hope that only in this case these words have not been found.”¹³ Also, the last two lines of the passage have been met with the critics’ objections. Mitzner sees a shallowing of the meaning: “After all, ‘to say something’ is more than to bid farewell, it is to pass on something important: knowledge, a last will.”¹⁴ Gross, on the other hand, grumbles at the repetition of the word “mankind”: “and is there another mankind, one that does not remain? Because, after all, he [the poet] cannot bid farewell to the mankind that will come after him.”¹⁵

However, at least in the last case – and indirectly in the previous ones – Miłosz’s corrections can be defended. The repetition in the final stanza not only serves to maintain the rhythm, very strong and clear in the Polish original, but also has a deeper meaning: it divides mankind, as it were, into two groups: those who remain and those who die. It reminds us that along with Giordano Bruno and the murdered Jews, mankind, humanity was also dying. Also, the repetition suggests that it is between those dying and the rest that an impassable barrier grows in the language, in which not only can nothing weighty be said, but it is impossible even to formulate a farewell. The word stays with us, those remaining, and it has been taken away from those dying.¹⁶ Contrary to the critics quoted above, I would say

¹³ P. Mitzner, “Słowa szukając na Campo di Fiori” [Looking for words at Campo de’ Fiori], pp. 103, 102.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 103.

¹⁵ N. Gross, “Dzieje jednego wiersza” [The history of one poem], p. 88.

¹⁶ The passage in question also has a poignant reference to facts, which is not indicated in the poem directly. According to some accounts, Giordano Bruno was led into the pyre with his tongue immobilized by a wooden gag to prevent him from uttering sinful, troublemaking words; see: *Giordano Bruno przed trybunałem inkwizycji. Akta procesu* [Giordano Bruno before the Inquisition court. Process files], translated from Italian by W. Zawadzki, Warsaw 1953, pp. 114–115, 165. The relationship between “Campo dei Fiori” and historical facts deserves a separate study.

that the poet left the stronger, more dramatic and less morally comfortable version for those who remain, including himself.

Gross continues his argument:

When Miłosz created this poem under the impression of houses burning with living people, he could have thought and written that there were no words in human language that could justify what the eyes could see – it was undoubtedly a sincere expression of his feelings, which were echoed by other poets as well. “Poetry died in Auschwitz” was an accepted saying during those times.¹⁷

However, we all know that it did not die, and “Campo dei Fiori” is the best example of this. Would this or any other post-war poem have been written if indeed “there were no words in any human tongue” for expressing evil and suffering, if we were not able not only to describe horrifying experiences, but also to tame them, thus somehow neutralizing them, with the help of beautiful words and through the power of stories? There is always something hypocritical in phrases about the death of poetry written by any poet. The change made by Miłosz diminishes this arguably necessary load of hypocrisy: Giordano did not find a word, but to claim that a poet cannot find it either would contradict the existence of the poem we have just read. Characteristically, in the quoted paragraph, Gross refers to the emotions of the witnesses of the events of 1943: this is how it was felt and said at the time, it was understandable, sincere – in that context. However, Miłosz’s work, though written in the heat of the moment, anticipates, after all, the inevitable change in perspective by telling the story of “oblivion / Born before the flames have died” (SP). What’s more, the poem itself is a testament to this inevitable growing distance – while remaining a testament to memory, too.

¹⁷ N. Gross, “Dzieje jednego wiersza” [The history of one poem], p. 87.

3.

The poetic statement that the dying can find no words to express their experiences corresponds with Miłosz's discursively formulated observations about

the contrast between the experience of people condemned to death by a totalitarian state and the language in which they were able to convey that experience. They always did it in the inherited, conventional language inherent in the cultural environment that shaped them before the war. They wanted to leave a trace in words, but they also looked for a way to express their *knowledge*, which they felt was completely new and radically different from their previous knowledge of reality. And the language *could not keep up*, as if retreating into ready-made themes and formulas, or even seeking refuge in them.¹⁸

In the essay cited above, Miłosz defends poetry against the charge of immorality, arguing that only thanks to an artist's "inhuman" distance from the subject – even if it is the suffering of another human being – can we gain access to the seemingly incommunicable states of humanity destroyed by totalitarianisms:

a paralyzing and impossible to communicate experience is captured by ordinary people, not artists, in the language of inherited conventions. These conventions are broken by poetic art (unfortunately, only due to the fact that it assumes a "cool and picky attitude towards humanity").¹⁹

It is known today that, when writing about the linguistic helplessness of "ordinary people" in the face of a reality that transcends existing conceptual frameworks, Miłosz was wrong. The numerous personal documents of the Holocaust era, even – or perhaps especially – those left behind by poorly educated people (children, for example), break the barrier of con-

¹⁸ C. Miłosz, "Niemoralność sztuki" [The immorality of art], in: idem, *Ogród nauk* [The garden of science], Cracow 1998, pp. 192–193 [emphasis by the author]. Miłosz cites here approvingly the findings of Michał Borwicz contained in his work *Ecrits des condamnés à mort sous l'occupation allemande* [Writings of those sentenced to death under the German occupation] (Paris 1954).

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 194. The quote cited by the author is from Thomas Mann's *Tonio Kröger*.

ventionality, providing a remarkable testimony to the struggle with the existing language, and sometimes to the reflection on its mismatch with what demands to be said.²⁰ In fact, it even seems that it is literature, taken as a whole, that had more difficulty liberating itself from inherited forms. This is especially true of texts written by *minorum gentium* authors or by amateurs aspiring to become writers, but not only. After all, it is precisely “Campo dei Fiori” that is a masterpiece, and yet it is somehow inappropriate due to its very perfection, and this is why Miłosz disliked it.

[...] the piece is so composed that the narrator, whom we presume to be the poet, himself, comes off unscathed. Some are dying, others are enjoying themselves, all that he does is to “register a protest” and walk away, satisfied by thus having composed a beautiful poem. And so, years later, he feels he got off too lightly.²¹

– this is how the poet’s train of thought was reconstructed by Błoński. The critic sees Miłosz’s renewed attempt to grapple with the condition of a Holocaust witness in the poem “A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto,” a work that is far from classical models and is difficult to read, being a statement of a man – in this case, too, one could add: the poet – who is unsuccessfully defending himself against remorse.

A motif of two languages and two modes of expression that corresponds to this issue can be found in the ending of “Campo dei Fiori,” and this is precisely the second of the passages that are different in the two versions of this poem. Below is the variant written during the occupation (restored by the poet with minimal changes in the latest editions):²²

²⁰ See for example: J. Leociak, *Text in the Face of Destruction: Accounts from the Warsaw Ghetto Reconsidered*, translated by E. Harris, Warsaw 2004.

²¹ J. Błoński, “The Poor Poles”, p. 323.

²² In the quoted letter, Miłosz wrote: “The version printed in *Survival* is the best. Except: 1) ‘Their tongue has become foreign to us’ – but I found out too late, from Weinfeld, that there was another version, I simply overlooked this change and unfortunately it was printed everywhere as in *Survival*; 2) ‘On the new Campo dei Fiori’ – instead of on the ‘great Campo dei Fiori’ – this, by the way, would require reflection and a separate discussion. [...] In the new editions I would restore the word ‘great’”; C. Miłosz, A letter to N. Gross;

A ci, ginący, samotni	Those dying here, the lonely
Już zapomniani od świata	Forgotten by the world,
<i>Język nasz stał się im obcy</i>	<i>Our tongue [has become] [foreign] [to] them</i>
Jak język dawnej planety.	[Like] the language of an ancient planet.
(ZO)	(SP, modified)

And the version from *Survival*:

I ci ginący, samotni,	Those dying here, the lonely
Już zapomniani od świata,	Forgotten by the world,
<i>Język ich stał się nam obcy</i>	<i>[Their] tongue [has become] [foreign to us]</i>
Jak język dawnej planety.	[Like] the language of an ancient planet.
(O)	(SP, modified)

Natan Gross comments:

[...] this is a strange change: “Our tongue has become foreign to them, like the language of an ancient planet,” that is, they (the dying ones) have no one to speak to; we (the world) speak the language of the past, of “an ancient planet,” while they (the fighters in the ghetto) die in the name of fighting the reactionary forces for a new world.

Turning this line into “Their tongue has become foreign to us like the language of an ancient planet” just does not make sense: why can we (the world) not understand their language? Do we not understand what they want? What they are fighting for? Why is their language the language of an ancient planet?²³

Even if this change did not make sense (as long as we are indeed dealing with a change and not a restoration of the original form – the manuscript corresponds, after all, to the variant from *Survival*), interpreters are perfectly fine with both versions. Let us first look at how the relevant passage is understood by those who have encountered the version “Our language has become foreign to them.” We already know Gross’s understanding. Józef Olejniczak, on the other hand, when interpreting “Campo dei Fiori,” writes

quoted after: N. Gross, “Dzieje jednego wiersza” [The history of one poem], p. 89. In the now-canonical 1993 edition of *Znak* (ZW), only the first amendment was made.

²³ N. Gross, “Dzieje jednego wiersza” [The history of one poem], p. 85.

in reference to both of the “metalinguistic” passages of the poem: “Man in his suffering is always alone, with his word he no longer reaches the witnesses of his suffering.”²⁴ Olejniczak’s interpretation has a didactic purpose, having appeared in a commented anthology of Miłosz’s poems addressed to foreigners interested in Polish culture. In a school study intended for Polish teachers and students, there is a more elaborate recommendation as to the meaning of this and the neighboring verses.

Its author, starting with a juxtaposition of the double image of lonely death from Miłosz’s poem with the Gospel description of the last moments of Christ crying from the cross: *Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?* [“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34)], states:

None of those standing around Jesus understood his words, his pain, or his despair. [...]

What does it mean, “the tongue of an ancient planet”? Could it be the language of those who are not afraid to die for what they believe in? Is this the language of those who are at peace with themselves to the end, even in the face of death? Is this the language of people who do not hesitate to risk their lives in the name of truth and freedom? If so, it means that we, on “our” planet, probably speak some other language, maybe the one that is “a connivance with official lies.”²⁵

However, the second version of “Campo dei Fiori” had become established in Polish national didactic circulation earlier than the first one, and its model interpretation, reprinted in school books and rewritten on the Internet, was presented decades ago by Bożena Chrzęstowska. In this interpretation, the phrase “Their tongue has become foreign to us” takes on the following meaning:

This sentence has an ambiguous meaning: in the literal sense, it refers to Hebrew, hence the source of the loneliness of the ghetto martyrs is their national alienation as a cause of indifference and forgetfulness on the part of Poles. We should add that it would also be appropriate here to talk about racial aliena-

²⁴ J. Olejniczak, *Czytając Miłosza* [Reading Miłosz], Katowice 1997, pp. 104–105.

²⁵ A. Kołat, *Wielcy polscy poeci współcześni. Analiza i interpretacja wierszy. 4. klasa liceum* [Great modern Polish poets. An analysis and interpretation of poems. 4th grade of high school], Warsaw 1997, p. 26. The author uses the ZW edition.

tion and the resulting attitude of the German oppressors, although this issue is not mentioned in the poem. A second, metaphorical meaning is suggested by the comparison “like the language of an ancient planet.” It is not an ethnic or national language, but the language in which the Scriptures – Old and New Testament – were written. The truths contained therein, e.g., thou shalt not kill, love thy neighbor, etc., are – given the loneliness of those dying – as if “from an ancient planet.” It would therefore be an alienation resulting from a loss of the basic truths of the Revealed Word, and this is the source of both the indifference of the crowd and the loneliness of those dying.²⁶

Such an interpretation is the result of an obvious misunderstanding (Hebrew was by no means the language of either the socialist fighters of the Jewish Combat Organization or the overwhelming majority of other Yiddish- or Polish-speaking residents of the Warsaw ghetto), but it also contains an over-interpretation (the allegedly religious meaning of this part of the poem, suggested in the explanation I cited earlier, as well) and a view of the attitude of the non-Jewish population towards fellow citizens dying behind the ghetto walls, which Miłosz would certainly not agree with (“national alienation [of Jews] as a cause of indifference and forgetfulness on the part of Poles”). At the same time, Chrzęstowska indirectly includes “Campo dei Fiori” in a number of realizations of the heroic topos often evoked in various, not only literary, representations of the Warsaw ghetto uprising. It leads us to see the Jewish insurgents as twentieth-century Samsons, Maccabees or defenders of Masada – heirs to the grand history of ancient Israel. However, there is no such heroizing in Miłosz’s poem, just as there are no religious, Christian references in it that the modern Polish school would be so glad to see.

4.

What then is there in “Campo di Fiori” and what does the strange, twofold verse in which Miłosz hesitates about the direction of alienation of the

²⁶ B. Chrzęstowska, *Poezje Czesława Miłosza* [The poetry of Czesław Miłosz], 3rd ed., Warsaw 1998, p. 119.

language refer to? There is, of course, that very alienation, distance. This is a key category of the entire poem, appearing in it in various forms and at different levels of organization. Alienation is experienced by Giordano Bruno, who is both its object and subject: he is “distant” in the eyes of the witnesses to his death, “as if centuries have passed,” and is unable to reach them with words.

Those who die in the ghetto are also the victims of alienation, “forgotten by the world” while still being alive (we guess that this is partly a consequence of the alienating stigma with which their Jewish ancestors were marked for centuries). The poet, by putting these two situations side by side, manifests his distance from the “riders on the carousel” (SP) and his alienation from the crowd of bystanders (to which, after all, he somehow belongs). Then there is the foreignness of the language of an “ancient planet,” regardless of whether it is “ours” or “theirs,” and there is the distance towards language as such (especially treated as a tool of art). It is manifested by the uncertainty of the author, documented by the two variants of the poem. Finally, there is the “immoral” distance of the artist from human suffering, viewed by him from the position of an observer (a reflective bystander, one would say), mentioned by Miłosz and Błoński.

The last two kinds of distance – not described in the text, but confirmed by its very existence and form – are perhaps the most significant, and in a sense they encompass the other types. The image of a poet as an observer adopting a “cool and picky attitude towards humanity,” while not denying himself the right to evaluate it, is built in “Campo dei Fiori” partly as a result of the temporal distance from the object of consideration. We know that the poem was written as a direct reaction to events in the ghetto. Miłosz’s biographer says:

The ghetto uprising broke out on April 19 [1943]; six days later, on Easter Sunday, the Miłosz family traveled to Bielany district to visit Jerzy Andrzejewski. The tram stopped at Krasińskich Square – they saw the carousel there, its seats rising above the ghetto wall, a crowd watching... [...] Miłosz wrote the poem “Campo dei Fiori” perhaps on the same day [...].²⁷

²⁷ A. Franaszek, *Miłosz. Biografia* [Miłosz. Biography], Cracow 2011, pp. 353–354.

Nothing of this immediacy – other than the date placed under the text²⁸ – remains in the poem. Moreover, the observed events are shifted into the past. This is the effect of the comparison of the ghetto massacre with a crime committed in the name of the law several centuries earlier. It is reinforced by the frame of the recollection, the grammatical forms of the past tense, and the fact that both time plans are treated with almost equal attention to detail (the image of the earlier event is even more detailed and visually refined):

I thought of the Campo dei Fiori
 In Warsaw by the sky-carousel
 One clear spring evening
 To the strains of a carnival tune.
 [...]
 But that day I thought only
 Of the loneliness of the dying,
 Of how, when Giordano
 Climbed to his burning
 [...]
 (SP)

The reader of these lines has the impression of interacting with an account in which superimposed are different phases of the experience of a mind wandering over the centuries and recalling either a February day at a Roman square (could grapes and peaches really be sold at this time of year?) or an April evening in Warsaw. The treatment of current events as something from a distant past, something completed, and part of a sequence of historical analogies is even more evident in the anticipation of a time when the terrible scenes unfolding before the poet's eyes would become history – just like the death of Giordano Bruno had done –

²⁸ The date is not present in the manuscript or in the 1944 edition. The formulation “Easter, 1943” was included only in the version published in the *Twórczość* magazine in mid-1945. In the volume *Survival*, there is only “1943.” Later editions give only the year and place, until the 1981 edition by Instytut Literacki (ILP), where an extended identification of the place and time appears: “Warsaw – Easter, 1943.” This is the formula Miłosz left in the last editions. It looks like a gradual restoration of the poem's situational character.

a story from which one can and even should learn a lesson, draw a moral (“Someone will read as moral,” SP). What is more, the person speaking in the poem has already drawn it for his own and our use. In this context, the reflection on the loneliness of those dying sounds, probably unintentionally, self-ironic. It turns out that it is not only Roman vendors who rush from the martyr’s pyre to their tasks, and it is not only simple Warsaw youth who feel bad about giving up the holiday fun. Also the poet is in an unpleasant hurry – to the future, which he projects at the end of his poem:

Until, when all is legend
And many years have passed,
On a great Campo dei Fiori
Rage will kindle at a poet’s word.
(SP)

It is as if only when the cause of the emotional and moral shock disappears should any active ethical response going beyond defensive reflexes become possible. The breakneck succession of times, pushing into the past what is currently seen in front of one’s eyes, seems to attest to a moral paralysis, the same one that Miłosz would depict directly – in the present tense and with an anxious leaning into the future – a few months later in “A Poor Christian”:

I am afraid, so afraid of the guardian mole.
[...]
What will I tell him, I, a Jew of the New Testament,
Waiting two thousand years for the second coming of Jesus?
My broken body will deliver me to his sight
And he will count me among the helpers of death:
The uncircumcised.²⁹

In “Campo dei Fiori,” this paralysis does not affect the sphere of poetic expression, allowing “a poem written as an ordinary human reflex in the

²⁹ C. Miłosz, “A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto,” translated by C. Miłosz, in: SP, p. 214.

spring of 1943”³⁰ to take on an irritatingly artful, almost mathematical form (eight stanzas, eight lines of eight syllables each, in the Polish original). Indeed, “A Poor Poet Looks at The Ghetto” would be a better title than the flamboyant Italian name given by the author. The irony, expressed with the epithet and by the third-person form – which in the case of “A Poor Christian” looks like an addition to facilitate the inclusion of the text in the cycle *Voices of Poor People* or a reflex of the author’s self-defense against to overt identification with the poem’s protagonist – would introduce a new dimension to “Campo dei Fiori”: a distance from oneself, from one’s own position, external to the events, and from the role of a cognitive, aesthetic, and ethical oracle usurped by the poet. But there is no self-irony in “Campo dei Fiori.” The “poet’s word” from the ending line of the poem has the status of an absolute in this world. It rises above the heads of the “people of Warsaw or Rome,” above the pyre of the Inquisition, and the shooting behind the ghetto wall, transforms everything into a legend, and in this new reality it has created it incites a safe rebellion with which readers will be able to identify, soothing their consciences.

The only moment in “Campo dei Fiori” that calls into question the status of the “poet’s word” is the double line about the unfamiliarity of language. In the softer version (“Our tongue has become foreign to them”), it indicates the incompatibility of traditional forms of expression – and among them, the form of poetic language in which “Campo dei Fiori” is written – with the situation of a human pushed beyond the limits of humanity. However, it should be noted that this version maintains the special prerogatives of the poet, who still has the ability to penetrate the minds of those dying behind the walls – he is the only one who knows what has become foreign to them, he is the only one who overcomes the barrier of foreignness in this very sense. The second version (“Their tongue has become foreign to us”) is more modest. It refers only to us, those who remain – and in this case the first person plural pronoun includes both the poet and his readers. That’s why such a formula is also more radical and more difficult to accept: it is we who do not understand or do not want to listen to the language of suffering, to the cries of those whose exclusion

³⁰ [E. Czarnecka] R. Górczyńska, *Podróżny świata* [The world traveler], p. 59.

we have allowed and whom we continue to exclude by referring to them as “they.” It is a pity that Miłosz abandoned this version.

At the same time, however, the textual change itself – like all the other ones – confirms the unsteadiness of language that Mitzner wrote about: “The poor poet Czesław Miłosz self-imposed the necessity of choosing one version.” “Miłosz’s thought is hesitating, although it wants very much to be stable. But for us, thanks to the existence of both versions, the scope of the drama recorded in ‘Campo dei Fiori’ [...] is expanded.”³¹ It is expanded not so much by the “symmetry of misunderstanding / alienation between Jews and Poles, between the living and the dead,”³² but by the drama of the poet himself, a witness of a terrible era, struggling – also in the field of literature – with experiences for which the past, tradition, range of concepts, order of values in which he was brought up, did not prepare him, because they could prepare no one. The drama is written in mutually linked versions of the poem, which, if possible, should be printed together. It seems that in this particular case, the principle of indisputability of *editio ultima*, the last authorial edition, should not apply.

List of abbreviations

- ZO Czesław Miłosz, “Campo di Fiori,” in: *Z otchłani. Poezje* [From the abyss. Poems], [T. J. Sarnecki, ed.], Warsaw: Jewish National Committee, 1944, pp. 14–15.
- O Czesław Miłosz, “Campo di Fiori,” in: idem, *Ocalenie* [Survival], Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1945, pp. 100–101.
- ILP Czesław Miłosz, “Campo di Fiori,” in: idem, *Poezje*, vol. 1, Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1981, pp. 90–91.
- ZW Czesław Miłosz, “Campo di Fiori,” in: idem, *Wiersze* [Poems], vol. 1, Cracow: Znak, 1993, pp. 170–172.
- DZ Czesław Miłosz, “Campo di Fiori,” in: idem, *Dziela zebrane. Wiersze* [Collected works. Poems], vol. 1, Cracow: Znak, 2001, pp. 191–193 [this edition contains revised texts based on manuscripts and typescripts, taking into account “the Author’s comments and final decisions” – J. Illg, *Nota wydawcy* [Publisher’s note], p. 286; “The author did the proofreading himself,

³¹ P. Mitzner, “Słowa szukając na Campo di Fiori” [Looking for words at Campo de’ Fiori], pp. 103, 102.

³² Ibidem, p. 102.

correcting the errors he noticed, as well as resolving numerous doubts arising from the comparison of versions published in journals and book editions with manuscripts and typescripts” – *ibid*, p. 291, “The poem ‘Campo dei Fiori’ had several versions. The present version was discussed in detail with the Author and compared by him with the manuscript” – *ibid*, p. 296].

- SP Czesław Miłosz, “Campo dei Fiori,” translated by Louis Iribarne and David Brooks, in: *idem, Selected Poems / Poezje wybrane*, Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1996, pp. 29–31.

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