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### Czesław Miłosz's Approach to Polish Literature: An Analysis of *The History of Polish Literature*

“Polish literature is not as genius as it is out of an excess of inferiority complexes, concocted by Polonists, neither is it as inferior as some people today would have us believe. The most important thing is that it exists”<sup>1</sup>.

Czesław Miłosz

Czesław Miłosz, who spent World War II in Poland, began a diplomatic career after the conflict ended. He was an envoy of the Communist government of Poland (as a cultural attaché) in the United States and France. In 1951, he decided to stay in the West and sought political asylum; Jerzy Giedroyc, editor of the Parisian magazine “Kultura”, among others, helped him at the time. In 1960, Miłosz moved permanently to the United States and accepted an offer to lecture at the University of California, though he had turned down a similar offer a year earlier<sup>2</sup>. It seems that—at least initially—he treated his academic activity primarily as a potential

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<sup>1</sup> Czesław Miłosz, “Prywatne obowiązki wobec polskiej literatury,” in *Prywatne obowiązki* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2001), 181.

<sup>2</sup> Andrzej Franaszek, *Miłosz. Biografia* (Kraków: Znak, 2011), 576. An English translation of this book is also available: *Miłosz: A Biography*, trans. Aleksandra Parker and Michael Parker (Cambridge, Ma: Belknap Press, 2017). Page numbers in this article refer to the Polish edition.

source of (additional) income; as he wrote in a letter to Aleksander Wat, “there is such a fashion among French intellectuals to earn money with lectures at American universities, and it is probably not necessary to avoid it, it is worth a try, at the same time I hope that, being there, it will be possible to arrange some *modus vivendi* to feed the purse with lectures there from time to time.”<sup>3</sup> After starting work, he wrote in one of his letters to Jerzy Giedroyc: “The lectures do not cost me as much pain as I anticipated. I don’t have to write them out. It is enough to jot down some notes in Polish and divide the material into bullet points. It seems that I please the students very much.”<sup>4</sup> Miłosz was pleased with the cordial reception, although in another letter to Giedroyc he wrote: “I feel like a cow that has joined the ballet.”<sup>5</sup> After just two months, the university authorities offered him a full-time position, despite his lack of teaching experience.<sup>6</sup> After some time, Miłosz’s attitude to teaching changed; he no longer treated it primarily as a source of income but, as he writes in one of his letters, “The jobs I have held so far have been an ordeal and a bore for me [...] Teaching Polish literature makes much more sense.”<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that in his academic work, he endeavoured to account for the specifics of his audience because he assumed that Americans studying in the 1960s had no knowledge of European history, or even an interest in history in general. For this reason, Miłosz emphasized the contemporary in his lectures (which was more attractive to the audience), including reflections on the condition of the world and humanity. It was also necessary to outline the context of the issues he discussed – primarily the historical, religious, and political contexts.<sup>8</sup>

A major difficulty in teaching was the lack of a modern and useful textbook. Miłosz had previously concluded that Krzyżanowski’s English-language synthesis was “a collection of all the banalities intended to solidify

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<sup>3</sup> Czesław Miłosz, A letter to Aleksander Wat, 18th September 1960, in *Czesław Miłosz, Aleksander Wat. Korespondencja*, ed. Alina Kowalczykowska (Warszawa: Więź, 2005), 215.

<sup>4</sup> Czesław Miłosz, A letter to J. Giedroyc, 29th October 1960, in *Jerzy Giedroyc, Czesław Miłosz. Listy 1952–1963*, ed. Marek Kornat (Warszawa: Więź, 2008), 438.

<sup>5</sup> Czesław Miłosz, A letter to J. Giedroyc, 2nd November 1960, in *Jerzy Giedroyc, Czesław Miłosz. Listy 1952–1963*, 447.

<sup>6</sup> Franaszek, *Miłosz. Biografia*, 589.

<sup>7</sup> A letter from Czesław Miłosz to Stanisław Vincenz, 22nd May 1961; source of the quote: Franaszek, 591.

<sup>8</sup> Franaszek, *Miłosz. Biografia*, 590–91.

forever the image of *la Pologne martyre*<sup>9</sup> – an anecdote Miłosz related is quite famous:

The book arouses bloodthirsty feelings in readers, as evidenced by copies of it in the Berkeley library, with inscriptions in English in the margins: “Good for them!” “They didn’t beat them enough!” “Dwarfs pretending to be giants!” etc. Because the assumption of Polish professors – that it is enough to inform the world about the nobility of the Polish soul to release latent admiration – is wrong. The human race does not value failure. Instead, failure only triggers sadistic desires.<sup>10</sup>

Miłosz began work on his textbook in late 1964, when, based on his course notes, he began dictating to his student, Catherine Leach.<sup>11</sup> His *The History of Polish Literature*, the first edition of which came out in 1969, was published at a time when Polish literature was growing in popularity in Anglo-Saxon countries, manifested through the publication of several translations of works from Polish authors such as – just to name a few – Aleksander Fredro, Stanisław Witkacy, Witold Gombrowicz, and Sławomir Mrożek.<sup>12</sup> Bogdan Czaykowski stresses that the publication of Miłosz’s textbook was a very important event at the time, especially since it was published by a recognized publishing house.<sup>13</sup> One might venture to say that Jerzy Giedroyc, who in his letters urged Miłosz to record his lectures in order to later create a historical-literary synthesis based on them,<sup>14</sup> had an influence on the creation of the book. It seems that at certain points Miłosz felt somehow compelled to create a textbook, as he wrote the following about his work: “If someone wants to do the worst possible job as well as possible, because no one else will undertake it, they have as an incentive the thrill of a gamble. It is an exercise in extravagance and carelessness, since skittishness and carefulness would advise one not to defile a poetic

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<sup>9</sup> Czesław Miłosz, “O Historii Polskiej Literatury, Wolnomyślicielach i Masonach,” in *Prywatne Obowiązki* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2001), 153.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>11</sup> According to Miłosz’s account, he merely dictated his lecture notes to his student, Catherine Leach. However, the extent of the collaboration between Miłosz and Leach might be the subject of further research.

<sup>12</sup> Bogdan Czaykowski, “‘The History of Polish Literature’ Czesława Miłosza,” *Kultura*, no. 12 (1969): 11.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Jerzy Giedroyc, A letter to Czesław Miłosz, 8th January 1962, in *Jerzy Giedroyc, Czesław Miłosz. Listy 1952–1963*, 566.

vocation with any utilitarian busyness.”<sup>15</sup> Elsewhere, Miłosz wrote of his reservations as follows:

Undoubtedly, quite a few arguments can be made against literary history. It is a rather silly field among us, in which various divisions and classifications, sometimes introduced simply for mnemonic reasons, are of great importance [...] to the surplus of names with which modern humanity has to deal, a new surplus is added, for instead of limiting oneself to a few first-rate authors, lesser authors are also mentioned, as they are “characteristic” in any case.<sup>16</sup>

Miłosz was aware of the difficulties facing him; as he later wrote, “It is enough to reflect for a moment to come to the conclusion that writing a history of Polish literature for foreigners is an impossible undertaking.”<sup>17</sup> The author did not hide his rather critical attitude toward Polish literature:

If Polish literature is my own, that does not mean that I feel like attributing to it more beauty than it possesses. In my opinion, it is a bit lame, a bit cross-eyed, too thin here, too saggy there, and I by no means hide the fact that I look at it this way. I’m not convinced by attempts to look for brilliance at all costs, the subject of which used to be some of the not-so-best works of the Romantics, or later, for example, the novels of Żeromski and Reymont, and today the Baroque. In fact, I’m interested primarily in writing as a picture of institutions and customs, so the bizarre and downright ranting gain weight with me, and many pages will probably amuse the reader because they entertained the author.<sup>18</sup>

Miłosz ironically stated: “I am to bring [to the world] the news that Poles are worthy of respect, simply because they have Jan Chryzostom Pasek.”<sup>19</sup> One thing that stands in the way of promoting Polish literature to foreign readers, according to Miłosz, is the national character of Poles and Polish authors: “Whoever writes in Polish must tell themselves soberly that Polish readers only pretend to be interested in human problems. They

<sup>15</sup> Miłosz, “Prywatne Obowiązki Wobec Polskiej Literatury,” 153–54.

<sup>16</sup> Czesław Miłosz, *Historia Literatury Polskiej*, trans. Maria Tarnowska (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2016), 915–16.

<sup>17</sup> Miłosz, “O Historii Polskiej Literatury, Wolnomysłicielach i Masonach,” 150.

<sup>18</sup> Miłosz, *Historia Literatury Polskiej*, 916–17.

<sup>19</sup> Miłosz, “Prywatne Obowiązki Wobec Polskiej Literatury,” 132.

are really only interested in one thing: being Polish. Being Polish, on the other hand, is: 1) Keeping to oneself and making sure no one else gets out of line; 2) Looking around to see if anyone else is fit for consumption, that is, if they can make the Polish name famous in the world.”<sup>20</sup> Additionally, Miłosz was aware of methodological difficulties: “Questions of method [...] have made it [literary history] into a neurasthenic centipede, which wonders which leg to put first, so it cannot move forward.”<sup>21</sup> It seems that Miłosz in a sense looked to distance himself from the history of literature as such; in one of his texts he stated:

Knowledge about literature, any literature, French, English, American, what is it? The interpretations of interpretations? The guidebooks to guidebooks for museum exhibits? And it will grow, divide into sub-disciplines, stratify, according to the principle of the increasing complexity of the human labyrinth, and only because more and more people need to be given good tinkering jobs. But this is taking place on the margins of an ever-increasing chaos; this chaos is multiplying, and it is time to realize what year it is.<sup>22</sup>

Interestingly, Miłosz relied heavily on the knowledge he gained from Vilnius high school in his academic work, and it did not take him long to prepare for his classes. As Miłosz’s biographer, Andrzej Franaszek, states, “His high school teachers taught him enough to enable him to teach Polish literature at a top American university years later.”<sup>23</sup>

Miłosz recalled: “It is possible that I myself would have considered it a disgrace to compose a history of literature, if it were not for the fact that, under the guise of a textbook, I was trying to write a story about the pathetic, tragic, grotesque, fantastic adventure of the Latinized Slavs, abounding in so-called general human values.”<sup>24</sup> It is worth noting that at one point his university work—of which the textbook was a “side” effect, so to speak—provided Miłosz with financial stability and contributed to

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 113–14.

<sup>21</sup> Miłosz, “O Historii Polskiej Literatury, Wolnomyslicielach i Masonach,” 151.

<sup>22</sup> Miłosz, “Prywatne Obowiązki Wobec Polskiej Literatury,” 132.

<sup>23</sup> Franaszek, *Miłosz. Biografia*, 100.

<sup>24</sup> Miłosz, “Prywatne Obowiązki Wobec Polskiej Literatury,” 132.

the development of his writing technique, especially in the fields of poetry and the essay.<sup>25</sup>

In order to understand the challenge facing Miłosz, it is important to realize that one of the characteristics of Polish literature is its peripherality, resulting in the relatively slight influence (or even familiarity) of our literary works outside the polonophone world. Similarly, Miłosz concluded in one of his essays: “Instead of advertising books written in Polish, one could just as successfully place the manuscripts in tree hollows.”<sup>26</sup> Miłosz pointed out in the introduction to his work that Polish literature has focused primarily on lyric and drama throughout its history, which makes it difficult to access in translation.<sup>27</sup> Polish literature, unlike the literary legacy of other countries on the fringes of Europe, such as Russia, Spain, and the Scandinavian countries, has not been able to break the geographic and linguistic barrier separating it from the common tradition of European literature. Miłosz’s synthesis was intended, among other things, to help Polish literature gradually cross that boundary.<sup>28</sup>

As author of *Dolina Issy* [The Issa Valley], Miłosz was well aware of the problems facing any literary venture that aimed to assimilate the Polish literary legacy outside Poland:

Probably all Polish writers of the twentieth century have been tormented by the question: can one be a great writer by writing in Polish? This is not equivalent to the question of whether one can be a great writer by writing in Norwegian, because the question is not about the number of Norwegian or Polish readers, but about the obstacle posed by the unfortunate “Polish case.” An unanswerable question, because if there is no reason to doubt that great works of literature can be created, for example, in African countries, it is not very likely that they were created by black people in America, obsessed with one problem: blackness-whiteness. Books by Polish professors devoted to spreading the word among foreigners about Polish geniuses have always been met with disbelief, justified insofar as the reader’s ear distinguished between the tone of offended pride, the boastful tone of a poor man making up for it with a face that seemingly no one else was born with [...]. If one’s

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<sup>25</sup> Jacek Głazewski, “Kompot Profesora Miłosza. (Czesław Miłosz Jako Historyk Literatury Staropolskiej),” *Przegląd Humanistyczny*, no. 5 (2012): 51.

<sup>26</sup> Miłosz, “Prywatne Obowiązki Wobec Polskiej Literatury,” 105.

<sup>27</sup> Miłosz, *Historia Literatury Polskiej*, 6.

<sup>28</sup> Czaykowski, “The History of Polish Literature’ Czesława Miłosza,” 12–13.

works are really stuck deep in the very fabric of Polish, what is best about them is untranslatable.<sup>29</sup>

In another passage, Miłosz stated: “Today the mixture of pathos and self-mockery is perhaps the most striking characteristic of Polish writing, which erects multi-storied edifices of admonition, of allusion to allusion, real labyrinths where the foreign reader gets lost.”<sup>30</sup>

It is worth recalling at this point the opinion of Norman Davies, who, characterizing Polish culture, seems to confirm the thesis of the untranslatability of the bulk of the most important works of Polish literature; according to the author of *God's Playground*, one of the most significant features of Polish culture is

[the use of] a kind of secret code, a set of allegories and allusions whose symbolic meaning could be deciphered only by the initiated. On the same principle, Polish artists turned into sort of priests, guarding a unique cult whose rites and ceremonies were intended for a closed audience. Maybe I'm exaggerating, but I think this is the main reason why such a great number of Polish masterpieces turned out to be untranslatable.<sup>31</sup>

Miłosz asked a rhetorical question, though one marked by irony:

Perhaps it is the Polish soul, possessed by shame and pain, that objects to composing the history of Polish literature in English? This is where the problem becomes serious. For since Polish literature is the literature of a country doomed to dependence and inferiority, it is defensible to say that it, like other provincial literatures, should be left to provincial scholars, while whoever brings it to the international market must pull it by the hair and lay it on a bit thick.<sup>32</sup>

Despite his (quite literally) critical approach to Polish literature, Miłosz, addressing his foreign readership, was not shy to count some Polish writers among the pantheon of the world's most eminent writers.<sup>33</sup> For example, he believed Bolesław Leśmian “is, in many ways, unique in world

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<sup>29</sup> Miłosz, “Prywatne Obowiązki Wobec Polskiej Literatury,” 103–5.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>31</sup> Norman Davies, “Polska Droga Do Wolności Kultury,” *Tygodnik Powszechny*, no. 33 (1993): 5.

<sup>32</sup> Miłosz, “O Historii Polskiej Literatury, Wolnomyślicielach i Masonach,” 179.

<sup>33</sup> Andrzej Zawada, “Nareszcie Po Polsku,” *Odra*, no. 10 (1993): 111.

literature,”<sup>34</sup> and Karol Irzykowski anticipates in *Paluba* [The Hag] the later experiments of European prose of the 1920s.<sup>35</sup> Mieczysław Ingłot states that one tangible strength of Miłosz’s textbook is the presence of numerous references to Anglo-Saxon culture, which make the issues presented easier to understand for the main audience of *The History of Polish Literature*, that being English speakers.<sup>36</sup>

It should be noted that Miłosz was aware of the shape he gave to his synthesis in terms of both his personal attitude and some of the controversial choices he made.<sup>37</sup> He himself believed that “[...] literary history is a literary genre, like drama or science-fiction; its form can be expanded and enriched, but only up to certain limits. It is not a treatise on the philosophy of history or an essay in which the author gives vent to his very personal thoughts.”<sup>38</sup> As Magdalena Piotrowska-Grot adds, “Literary history as seen by a literary writer [...] is simply a story they tell, with more or less success.”<sup>39</sup> In turn, Dorota Wojda states that “the textbook recognizes the creator of *Ziemia Ulro* [The land of Ulro] as a genre in which the author reveals himself indirectly, selecting and interpreting facts, as well as selecting dominant compositional pieces.”<sup>40</sup> Teresa Walas agrees, emphasizing Miłosz’s pursuit of a bold dialogue with the literary tradition, manifested, among other things, through his correction of previous scholars’ findings, displacing certain writers, and reevaluating phenomena.<sup>41</sup> In crafting his textbook, Miłosz drew on proven models; as he himself states:

As a textbook, it has its own laws inherent in genres, as utilitarian as possible, and these laws must be obeyed. Professor Francis J. Whitfield of Berkeley (author of a two-volume English-Polish dictionary) gave me good advice. He said this: “For decades, outlines and pictures of various literatures have proliferated, but the model of clarity of layout and factuality remains old Lanson’s textbook of French literature, familiar to generations of

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<sup>34</sup> Miłosz, *Historia Literatury Polskiej*, 549.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 573–74.

<sup>36</sup> Mieczysław Ingłot, “Podręcznik Ze Starej Szufłady,” *Warsztaty Polonistyczne*, no. 4 (1993): 96.

<sup>37</sup> Magdalena Piotrowska-Grot, “Historia Literatury Polskiej Pióra Czesława Miłosza,” *Śląskie Studia Polonistyczne*, no. 1/2 (2014): 136.

<sup>38</sup> Miłosz, “O Historii Polskiej Literatury, Wolnomyślicielach i Masonach,” 180.

<sup>39</sup> Piotrowska-Grot, “Historia Literatury Polskiej Pióra Czesława Miłosza,” 135.

<sup>40</sup> Dorota Wojda, “„Spożywają i Trawią Jeffersa”. Czesław Miłosz o Badaczach Literatury,” in *Miłosz i Miłosz*, ed. Aleksander Fiut, Artur Grabowski, and Łukasz Tischner (Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2013), 520.

<sup>41</sup> Teresa Walas, “Czesław Miłosz Jako Historyk Literatury Polskiej,” *Dekada Literacka*, no. 11 (1994): 1.



students. Why renounce what has stood the test of time so well?" I followed this advice and, having chosen Lanson as a guidepost, I rejected in advance the temptation to demonstrate some remarkable novelty of my syntheses.<sup>42</sup>

Some authors discussing Miłosz's work have questioned the accuracy of referring to it as a textbook. Czaykowski states that Miłosz did not do very well with the traditional textbook form; he noted that perhaps the essay form would have been a better choice, allowing a freer presentation of his personal attitude towards the subject.<sup>43</sup> Magdalena Piotrowska-Grot believes that Miłosz departed from modernist literary histories, avoiding a textbook-like, dry enumeration of authors and assigning them to given eras based on their dates of birth and death.<sup>44</sup> She describes Miłosz's work as follows:

Czesław Miłosz's *History of Polish Literature* is [...] methodologically a borderline work, combining remnants of the classical, utilitarian form with innovativeness and individuality. He also injects between the classics lesser-known examples—a kind of smuggling of his readings—and so also part of his own personality between the profiles of other authors. The specific selection becomes a projection of Miłosz's thoughts, fears, and worldviews far more than a periodization project.<sup>45</sup>

Miłosz was aware of the pitfalls lurking for a literary historian and the demands placed on him.<sup>46</sup> Ultimately, however, he stated that of greater importance to outlining the history of trends or phenomena was bringing to light the history of the specific people who created those histories.<sup>47</sup> Magdalena Piotrowska-Grot—based on Miłosz's statements and an article by Teresa Walas—puts forward the thesis that the organizational foundation of *The History of Polish Literature* is Miłosz's creation of a private mythology, building a bridge between a lost world and the one in which he lives.<sup>48</sup> One obstacle for Miłosz was the difficult—sometimes impossible—access to some literary works or their most valuable editions. Some could

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<sup>42</sup> Miłosz, *Historia Literatury Polskiej*, 915.

<sup>43</sup> Czaykowski, "The History of Polish Literature' Czesława Miłosza," 25.

<sup>44</sup> Piotrowska-Grot, "Historia Literatury Polskiej Pióra Czesława Miłosza," 129.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>47</sup> Miłosz, "O Historii Polskiej Literatury, Wolnomyślicielach i Masonach," 182.

<sup>48</sup> Piotrowska-Grot, "Historia Literatury Polskiej Pióra Czesława Miłosza," 129.

easily be found in Poland, though Miłosz, who was in the United States, could not use them. In several cases, this led to minor errors, consisting, for example, in the inaccurate citation of some texts. Miłosz sometimes had to limit himself to, for example, anthologies, incomplete editions, and even studies by other researchers.<sup>49</sup>

Czaykowski notes that it is important, when analyzing historical-literary syntheses, to look at the criteria on which their authors place particular emphasis; Miłosz, in a sense, takes a polemical position towards the contemporary currents of literary criticism.<sup>50</sup> It is worth quoting at this point from *The History of Polish Literature*:

Brought up in Poland, I am imbued, for better or worse, with the historicism typical of many European intellectuals. For the reader who is expecting an eager search for purely aesthetic values, this will not be a good credential. Literature, to me, appears as a series of moments in the life of a species, coagulated into language and, thus, made accessible for reflection by posterity. While severe discrimination is a necessary quality for anyone who wants to explore the jungle of time, the human voice we hear in that jungle deserves respect even if it is awkward and faltering... Because I feel this way, I have given much space to those developments which are not responsible for any masterpieces but which are characteristic of a given period. I have not scorned the funny, the crazy, or the bizarre. Moreover, since literature in Poland has always strongly reacted to historical situations and one cannot always assume the reader's knowledge of certain facts, I have introduced every chapter with a brief sketch of the international and domestic political scene. The tendency in these prefatory remarks is toward a history of institutions and ideas.<sup>51</sup>

In his analysis of the above declaration, Czaykowski accuses Miłosz of failing to formulate specific criteria for selection, including aesthetics. It is worth noting that Miłosz explicitly declared that he was driven by “conscious, stubborn anti-aestheticism.”<sup>52</sup> Jan Tomkowski similarly concludes, “The book is a mess (programmatically!), devoid of any

<sup>49</sup> Głażewski, “Kompot Profesora Miłosza. (Czesław Miłosz Jako Historyk Literatury Staropolskiej),” 57.

<sup>50</sup> Czaykowski, “‘The History of Polish Literature’ Czesława Miłosza,” 17.

<sup>51</sup> Miłosz, *Historia Literatury Polskiej*, 8.

<sup>52</sup> Miłosz, “O Historii Polskiej Literatury, Wolnomyślicielach i Masonach,” 182.

methodological thought.”<sup>53</sup> Czaykowski, taking into account the point of view of a foreign reader, concludes that it is an insufficient argument that becoming acquainted with works that are weak, although characteristic of the period, will allow non-Poles a greater knowledge of Polish literature. In other words, for Czaykowski, Miłosz unnecessarily devotes too much attention to mediocre texts, but which nonetheless fit into the historical context, and the passages dealing with more superior works that have potential for expressing aesthetic and universal values suffer as a result. This feature, acceptable in university textbooks for Poles, is undesirable in the case of studies addressed to foreign readers, towards whom the historical-literary synthesis is also supposed to perform a popularizing function.<sup>54</sup> Referring to these accusations, Miłosz commented: “Since the reader knows nothing about the adventures of a given collectivity and the problems harnessing it, literary works, even weak ones, can be a means to give them an idea of the orientations or directions of thought.”<sup>55</sup>

In a letter to Jan Błoński, Miłosz adds:

Well, so I am lecturing on Polish literature, encountering various problems. One doesn't realize that Poland and its literature is something uniquely hated in the world [...] Add to this the complete lack of decent books in English about Polish history and the history of Polish literature. There are books, even a lot, but they are written chauvinistically, praising themselves, puffing themselves up, as if deliberately elevating Poland to the heavens in such a way as to cause perversity in any normal person. So, I take, for example, Dyboski's *History of Poland* in the library [...] and there in the margins, when he talks about the third partition, exclamations like “Evviva Catherina!” or on some occasion “Disgusting chauvinist Pollack,” more or less the content of the remarks in the margins of Julian Krzyżanowski's *Romantyzm polski [Polish Romanticism]*.<sup>56</sup>

In turn, he wrote about the author of another textbook, Manfred Kridl:

Charming this man, a gentle ironist, the initiator of formalist research in Poland, wrote his work during World War II in Polish and for Polish

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<sup>53</sup> Jan Tomkowski, “Pan Profesor Miłosz,” *Spoleczeństwo Otwarte*, no. 10 (1993): 46.

<sup>54</sup> Czaykowski, “The History of Polish Literature’ Czesława Miłosza,” 18.

<sup>55</sup> Miłosz, “O Historii Polskiej Literatury, Wolnomyślicielach i Masonach,” 156.

<sup>56</sup> Czesław Miłosz, A letter to J. Błoński; source of the quote: Franaszek, 594.

immigrant readers, which should explain the rather didactic tone and, for an ironist, the somewhat overly cheeky, conventional nature of his review. Perhaps Kridl is proof that the professor, until he weans himself off his Polish audience, is incapable of appealing to foreigners. Family myths, rooted in language and finding emotional resonance, are dead to them. Hence probably their complaints that Kridl is extremely boring.<sup>57</sup>

It is worth noting that an ironic attitude to Polish martyrdom appears in many of Miłosz's statements. In *Prywatne obowiązki* [Private Obligations] he wrote: "In my childhood I did not know that Polish is the speech of the beaten, the humiliated, of those suffering from martyrdom and slavery complexes."<sup>58</sup> Elsewhere, the Nobel laureate described Poland as a nation from whose "resentments, grievances, and mutual hatreds no one understands anything."<sup>59</sup>

Konstanty Jeleński notes that one of the tasks Miłosz set himself was to demonstrate that the stereotypes most strongly rooted in Polish consciousness, such as seeing in Romanticism the core of Polish literature and history, and identifying Polishness with Catholicism, are relatively fresh.<sup>60</sup> Miłosz put more emphasis on the "golden age" of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which, in his opinion, left a greater mark on our literature; this was his innovation, though it is one that is controversial from the point of view of the traditional approach to the history of Polish literature. As he stated, "Nearly half of my work is dedicated to literary phenomena previous to the emergence of Romanticism on the European scene."<sup>61</sup>

It is worth briefly reviewing selected opinions on Miłosz's textbook. The extended and in-depth analyses by Konstanty Jeleński, Bogdan Czaykowski, Mieczysław Inglot, and Jacek Bartyzel deserve special attention. In addition, several other critical voices will be cited.

In 1981, Konstanty Jeleński described the textbook as "the most accessible book by Miłosz, which any Polish reader could read with [...]"

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<sup>57</sup> Miłosz, "O Historii Polskiej Literatury, Wolnomyślicielach i Masonach," 153.

<sup>58</sup> Miłosz, "Prywatne Obowiązki Wobec Polskiej Literatury," 100.

<sup>59</sup> Miłosz, "O Historii Polskiej Literatury, Wolnomyślicielach i Masonach," 152.

<sup>60</sup> Konstanty Jeleński, "Czesław Miłosz – Historyk Literatury Rzeczypospolitej," in *Zbiegi Okoliczności* (Paryż: Instytut Literacki, 1982), 239.

<sup>61</sup> Miłosz, *Historia Literatury Polskiej*, 7.

interest and benefit.”<sup>62</sup> He lamented that Polish audiences had to wait so long for a Polish translation of the book; he also stated that it was likely no other study of the history of Polish literature had taken into account texts written in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Russian. Miłosz, on the other hand, not only noted these sources, but also sought to trace the evolution of the language of the nobility of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania on their basis. Andrzej Mencwel also believes that a great merit of Miłosz’s textbook is its drawing out of the connections between Polish literature and the cultures and languages of the nations that used to be part of the Commonwealth, primarily Lithuanian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian. Mencwel adds, “We have many guardians of Polish heritage, and the attitude they take is most often Teutonic—expansive and protective. In Miłosz’s case, the opposite is true—his point of view is brotherly and partnerly, so to speak. He is not concerned with our dominion over neighboring cultures, but with how we have contributed to the emancipation of these cultures.”<sup>63</sup>

Konstanty Jeleński emphasizes that Miłosz focused not only on recognized masterpieces, but also included in his work unusual, strange, and amusing texts. Miłosz’s valuable innovation, according to Jeleński, was the attention he paid to Polish centers of Jewish thought.<sup>64</sup> For Jeleński, there is value in Miłosz’s textbook in the way it combined seemingly unrelated literary phenomena, such as *Kroniki tygodniowe* [Weekly Chronicles] by Bolesław Prus, and the social philosophy of Antoni Słonimski.<sup>65</sup> Czaykowski notes that devoting a relatively extensive section to the work of Jan Potocki—a problematic figure for most authors of literary history textbooks—is also a valuable innovation by Miłosz.<sup>66</sup> In addition, the strengths of Miłosz’s study include the richness and diversity of the literary material presented along with its background, the frequent handling of a broad comparative background, its brisk and lively style, readability, and how it so scrupulously avoids the onset of boredom in the reader.<sup>67</sup>

Jeleński notes that at certain points Miłosz had problems with maintaining an objective view of our literature, which is expressed in his

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<sup>62</sup> Jeleński, “Czesław Miłosz – Historyk Literatury,” 238.

<sup>63</sup> Andrzej Mencwel, “Według Miłosza,” *Kultura (Polityka)*, no. 9 (1993): II.

<sup>64</sup> Jeleński, “Czesław Miłosz - Historyk Literatury,” 240.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>66</sup> Czaykowski, “‘The History of Polish Literature’ Czesława Miłosza,” 25.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

particular fondness for Eliza Orzeszkowa and Maria Konopnicka, and his not very favorable attitude towards Henryk Sienkiewicz.<sup>68</sup> Interestingly, Andrzej Zawada states that the passages on Sienkiewicz in Miłosz's textbook *are* written objectively.<sup>69</sup> Zbigniew Folejewski, too, states that the author managed to “impose an iron discipline on himself and achieve, on the whole, a perhaps maximum objectivity.”<sup>70</sup>

Some accuse Miłosz of focusing on sketching the background, which consisted, among other things, of biographical profiles. For example, Jan Tomkowski states that “the sin of biographism weighs down *The History of Polish Literature*. Usually, half of the text devoted to a writer is filled with a detailed biography,”<sup>71</sup> while Miłosz devoted relatively little space to the structure or style of the work. However, other reviewers consider the elaborate background an advantage of Miłosz's study. For example, writing about Waław Berent's *Ozimina* [Winter Wheat], Miłosz used the phrases “great composition,” and “excellent novel,” but insufficiently justifies what this greatness and excellence consist of. Similarly, in the case of Cyprian K. Norwid, Miłosz focused on the writer's life and historical and aesthetic views, treating the very poetry of the author of *Vade-mecum* in a perfunctory manner.<sup>72</sup>

Miłosz was also accused of omissions and factual errors - the lack of even the slightest mention of Michał Choromański is an example of the former, while for the latter there is the suggestion of the word “Weeping-god”<sup>73</sup> as the only example of a neologism in Leśmian's work, although it is probably not a neologism, but instead a dialectism.<sup>74</sup> Miłosz incorrectly assessed the role of Słonimski after his return to Poland. Miłosz claimed that the former member of the poetic group “Skamander” remained on the sidelines during the Stalinist period, only to later become an important figure in the literary milieu of the communist era; in fact, however, Słonimski directly—and overly zealously—declared his readiness to support the authorities of the Polish People's Republic with his work, for which he was duly rewarded.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Jeleński, “Czesław Miłosz – historyk literatury,” 241.

<sup>69</sup> Zawada, “Nareszcie Po Polsku,” 111.

<sup>70</sup> Zbigniew Folejewski, “Czesław Miłosz Jako Historyk Literatury,” *Poezja*, no. 7 (1981): 73.

<sup>71</sup> Tomkowski, “Pan Profesor Miłosz,” 46.

<sup>72</sup> Czaykowski, “‘The History of Polish Literature’ Czesława Miłosza,” 20.

<sup>73</sup> “Płaczybóg” in Polish (translator's note).

<sup>74</sup> Czaykowski, “‘The History of Polish Literature’ Czesława Miłosza,” 21.

<sup>75</sup> Jan Marx, “Miłosz Ocenzurowany,” *Biuletyn Literacki*, no. 6/7 (1993/1994): 21.

Several factual errors (though rather minor ones) were also pointed out to Miłosz by Maria Danilewiczowa<sup>76</sup>.

Reviewers repeatedly note that Miłosz did better with ancient literature (since it was already the subject of so many analyses and studies) than with nineteenth century and later literature. Piotr Skórzyński, writing about Miłosz's textbook, says, "It is an extremely conscientious work—up to our century. Then the troubles begin."<sup>77</sup> In his review, Skórzyński lists quite a few accusations, mainly concerning Miłosz's judgments and sympathies.

Miłosz poured most of his own emotions into the passages devoted to World War II and the beginnings of People's Poland.<sup>78</sup> However, Henryk Jezierski accuses Miłosz of voluntarily agreeing to truncate the first Polish edition of his textbook, from which the chapter on the literature of World War II and the postwar years was removed.<sup>79</sup> These excerpts were included in later editions of the textbook translated into Polish.

Miłosz was accused of excessive historicism, downplaying aesthetic criteria, disregarding formal analysis, the improper hierarchy of works cited, and omitting many texts that might have been of interest to a Western reader because of their universality or novelty.<sup>80</sup> Miłosz partially responded to these accusations in *Private Obligations*:

No one will convince foreigners that the nineteenth-century Polish novel in any form, positivist or secretly romantic, has universal significance, while it is only a single poignant chapter from the history of European societies [...]. What generations live by, for example, a ritual, a proverb, a hymn, a carol, is arguably more important than masterpieces or semi-masterpieces.<sup>81</sup>

Mieczysław Ingłot notes that, unlike with newer textbooks, Miłosz's work usually gives only one view of a given work—Miłosz's own—instead of juxtaposing different analyses from researchers and interpreters.<sup>82</sup> The distinctiveness of the assessments of the different works, which for some was a weakness of Miłosz's textbook, was for others (such as Andrzej

<sup>76</sup> Maria Danilewiczowa, "Prof. Miłosz," *Wiadomości*, no. 49 (1969): 1.

<sup>77</sup> Piotr Skórzyński, "Miłosz Jako Belfer," *Tygodnik Solidarność*, no. 27 (1994): 12.

<sup>78</sup> Piotrowska-Grot, "Historia Literatury Polskiej Pióra Czesława Miłosza," 131.

<sup>79</sup> Henryk Jezierski, "Miłosz Okrojony," *Wiadomości Kulturalne*, no. 7 (VII 1994): 11.

<sup>80</sup> Czaykowski, "The History of Polish Literature' Czesława Miłosza," 24.

<sup>81</sup> Miłosz, "O Historii Polskiej Literatury, Wolnomysłcieliach i Masonach," 160.

<sup>82</sup> Ingłot, "Podręcznik Ze Starej Szufłady," 97–98.

Zawada) its great strength.<sup>83</sup> The critics' accusations of subjectivity were countered by Miłosz as follows:

The author is only human, which means he tends to introduce "Rabbit's Friends-and-Relations" and leave out enemies.<sup>84</sup> However, this goes against the rules of the game and he must be able to restrain himself. In this sense, the book is, unfortunately, too ascetic already. Starting with the last century: I do not like Sienkiewicz, however, I did treat him *fairly*. Approaching our era: I didn't say (what I actually think) that the style of Reymont's *Chłopi* [*The Peasants*] is a horror story, I expressed it quite mildly, nor that Berent's *Ozimina* would be a great novel if someone else rewrote it in ordinary Polish. There are those dreadful *babiszony*, like Zofia Nałkowska, *précieuse* [pretentious—K.B.], whose novels are nauseating after reading a single page, but my respect for "hurdles" forced me to give her space. Or Maria Kuncewicz, a mediocre novelist [...], but she meant something on the fringes before the war, so here she is; Leon Kruczkowski, a worthy, though more a mule than a writer, but it was difficult to omit *Kordian i cham* [Kordian and the boor] or his plays altogether. No one will suspect me of love for Przyboś, nevertheless he has a rather prominent place. And so on. On the contrary, some poets and prose writers I like are not mentioned at all for certain reasons.<sup>85</sup>

Jeziński notes that Miłosz differed significantly from other literary historians in some of his assessments. An example is the passage on Sienkiewicz's *Latarnik* [*The lighthouse keeper*], which, according to Miłosz, is "melodramatic kitsch," while other literary historians such as Juliusz Kleiner, Janina Kulczycka-Saloni, and Julian Krzyżanowski describe the same novella as a masterpiece that has no equal in world literature in many respects.<sup>86</sup> As Teresa Walas states, "Viewing Polish literature from a distance, so with a foreign eye, so to speak, and at the same time filtering its image

<sup>83</sup> Zawada, "Nareszcie Po Polsku," 111.

<sup>84</sup> Meaning "everyone," the "whole kit and kaboodle." The original Polish reads "krewnych i znajomych Królka." This is from the Polish translation of Milne's *Winnie the Pooh*, translated by Irena Tuwim. Rabbit had a large number of acquaintances, referred to by the phrase "Rabbit's Friends-and-Relations," whom he took with him everywhere (translator's note).

<sup>85</sup> Miłosz, "O Historii Polskiej Literatury, Wolnomysłcieliach i Masonach," 155–56.

<sup>86</sup> Jeziński, "Miłosz Okrojony," 11.



through the prism of personal choices and prejudices, Miłosz reevaluates its circulating hierarchy.”<sup>87</sup>

Ingłot accused Miłosz of sometimes quite serious simplifications and ignoring more recent conclusions among literary historians while uncritically quoting judgments that were often not based in reality. It is worth noting that in the case of *Nie-Boska komedia* [*The undivine comedy*] Miłosz cited Maria Janion's interpretation of the dialectical, post-Hegelian overtones of the drama, which was later retracted by the author herself.<sup>88</sup> Ingłot summarizes his reflections on Miłosz's work as follows:

Miłosz's textbook [...] was clearly addressed to the American student. And undoubtedly, at the time, it could perform the task of an encyclopedic guide to the history of a literature that was exotic to them. Today it appears to us in this country as a book from an old drawer. Translated undoubtedly as a tribute to Miłosz's unquestionable merits, it is perhaps pleasing to the hearts of the great poet's admirers. However, it can hardly be considered a textbook worthy of special recommendation to a Polish school or a Polish student.<sup>89</sup>

It is worth noting that *The History of Polish Literature* was at one time on the recommended reading list for high schools.<sup>90</sup> One might be tempted to make a comment at this point—it seems that some reviewers applied the wrong measure to Miłosz's study, as if forgetting that it was a work intended for foreign readers unfamiliar with Polish literature and culture, and only secondarily translated into Polish. Therefore, it is difficult to expect that a study resulting from the adoption of other assumptions can compete on equal terms with textbooks intended from the beginning as historical-literary syntheses for the Polish-speaking reader.

Jacek Bartyzel notes the far-from-objective dislike for conservative Catholicism that emerges from some passages of Miłosz's work, as well as the rather emphatically expressed sympathy for Protestantism.<sup>91</sup> According to Bartyzel, Miłosz can also be accused of a lack of objectivity when it comes to evaluating nationalism and National Democracy, with the textbook

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<sup>87</sup> Walas, “Czesław Miłosz Jako Historyk Literatury Polskiej,” 8.

<sup>88</sup> Ingłot, “Podręcznik Ze Starej Szufłady,” 98.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>90</sup> Jezierski, “Miłosz Okrojony,” 11.

<sup>91</sup> Jacek Bartyzel, “Literatura Gnozą Prześwietlona,” *Arka*, no. 47 (1993): 52.

failing to offer even a brief factual description of the ideology of this movement and the people associated with it.<sup>92</sup> More than once, Bartyzel accuses Miłosz of “silence, which becomes, in effect, a falsification.”<sup>93</sup> He goes on to note that at least some of Miłosz’s decisions were politically motivated:

There is no denying [...] a clearly “partisan” criterion for selection, the victims of which are unilaterally writers who are less “progressive” than their more or less artistically equal competitors. [...] In the “passéist” camp there is Staff and there are Skamandrites, albeit the “right-wingers” Lechoń and Wierzyński are clearly marginalized in relation to the “progressive” Tuwim and Słonimski and the political conformist Iwazskiewicz—exactly the same proportions were present in communist school textbooks! [...] It is also astonishing that in the generation of the Second Avant-Garde, Czechowicz was not particularly discussed, and only three sentences were devoted to Sebyła, that is, of the three undoubtedly most important poets of this generation, the lone star gained additional luster.... Miłosz.<sup>94</sup>

Bartyzel concludes: “For Miłosz, the entire history of literature, ideas, and social thought constitutes a string of constantly renewed and never-ending struggle of enlightened, progressive, democratic-left intellectuals sensitive to ‘social injustice,’ who are against religious ‘dogmatism,’ social ‘reaction,’ and nationalist ‘madness.’”<sup>95</sup> The conservative columnist’s assessment of Miłosz’s work is unequivocally negative, although it seems that at least at some points he failed to avoid being biased – a crime of which he accuses Miłosz. It is worth noting that Janusz Padalak describes Bartyzel’s article as “a political pamphlet.”<sup>96</sup> In a similar vein, Jan Majda comments on Miłosz’s synthesis in his utterly vilifying book, *Antypolskie oblicze Czesława Miłosza* [Czesław Miłosz’s anti-Polish face]. Majda writes:

Miłosz rightly calls himself [...] a ‘centrist,’ because only a cosmopolitan centrist could describe the works of these two excellent writers in particular as bad literature, because for us Sienkiewicz and Żeromski are, after all,

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 53–54.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 56–57.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>96</sup> Janusz Padalak, “Dwa Razy o «Historii Literatury polskiej» Czesława Miłosza,” *Polonistyka*, no. 6 (1994): 375.

importantly patriotic, moral, and artistic pillars of our literature. Lawyer Miłosz has the mentality of a prosecutor, not a literary historian, so he accuses our literature in a prosecutorial manner, but he has no expertise in the literary field, so all his accusations are false.<sup>97</sup>

Majda even goes so far as to call Miłosz's work a "pseudo-book,"<sup>98</sup> and his assessments "malicious and partisan in terms of science."<sup>99</sup>

Andrzej Zawada described Miłosz's research attitude as "substantive nonconformism,"<sup>100</sup> adding that for the book's main audience, that is, foreign students, the independent and holistic nature of the textbook is extremely important: "And this is what I, as a reader and user of Miłosz's *History of Literature*... have always been delighted by. The transversality and comprehensiveness of it. The clarity of the argument and the accuracy of the syntheses."<sup>101</sup> Zawada is full of praise for Miłosz's synthesis, which (in his opinion) situated specific texts with the greatest precision in their precise historical and cultural milieu, as well as—in a way hitherto unheard of in translators' textbooks—enumerating all linguistic and artistic innovations.<sup>102</sup> In addition, Miłosz's textbook "will satisfy every advocate of logical order and clear sense."<sup>103</sup> Jacek Bartyzel also lists clarity and harmony among the strengths of Miłosz's textbook.<sup>104</sup> Andrzej Zawada assessed Miłosz's textbook as "excellent and balanced."<sup>105</sup>

Barbara Kowalik describes Miłosz's synthesis as modern and progressive,<sup>106</sup> listing the following strengths of *The History of Polish Literature*:

The author consciously departs from the stereotypical thinking about Polish literature as a monolith whose main features are romanticism, Roman Catholicism, mono-nationalism, and monolingualism. He emphasizes the role of Protestantism in the development of Polish writing [...]; he

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<sup>97</sup> Jan Majda, *Antypolskie Oblicze Czesława Miłosza* (Krzeszowice: Dom Wydawniczy „Ostoja”, 2005), 48.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>100</sup> Zawada, "Nareszcie Po Polsku," 110.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> Bartyzel, "Literatura Gnozą Prześwietlona," 50.

<sup>105</sup> Zawada, "Nareszcie Po Polsku," 111.

<sup>106</sup> Barbara Kowalik, "Miłosz Mizoginista?," *Akcent*, no. 1 (1995): 12.

recognizes the presence of other nations and languages in Poland [...]; he highlights factors that are usually overlooked, such as freemasonry (he notes, for example, that practically all so-called people of the Enlightenment were associated with freemasonry).<sup>107</sup>

However, she believes that Miłosz treated women and their work marginally in his textbook.<sup>108</sup>

Miłosz's textbook, as shown above, has met with a variety of critical assessments. One can identify both voices of admiration and those undermining the value of the entirety of *The History of Polish Literature*. Undoubtedly, however, this work was a response—or rather: an attempt to respond—to the need to fill the void in English-language studies of Polish literature in a way that would be accessible to readers. In view of the above assumptions, it is clear that Miłosz's synthesis cannot be evaluated in exactly the same way as established academic historical-literary textbooks, such as the texts of Julian Krzyżanowski, Teresa Michałowska, or Henryk Markiewicz. Miłosz's proposal had—and probably can still be said to have—a certain popularizing potential, which is an important achievement. Understandably, *The History of Polish Literature* is not an ideal textbook on the history of literature, and it does not exhaust the subject for Poles interested in their native literature. But the textbook's author himself was aware of this, as well as the fact that he did not always manage to remain “as impartial as possible.”<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>109</sup> The phrase was taken from the preface to the first Polish edition of the *The History of Polish Literature*.

Krzysztof Babicki

**Czesław Miłosz's Approach to Polish Literature:  
An Analysis of *The History of Polish Literature***

*The History of Polish Literature* by Czesław Miłosz was an attempt to introduce Polish literature to English-speaking readers. The textbook was developed on the basis of the lectures given by Miłosz at the University of California, Berkeley. Miłosz proposed an approach to literary history that differed from the syntheses available up to that time. One of the author's goals was to take a critical look at the established judgments in literary studies about individual authors, works, and phenomena. He also sought to present the history of Polish literature in such a way as to interest the audience; to this end, he endeavoured to refer to issues familiar to them, for example, from within Anglo-Saxon culture. Miłosz's textbook received a rather critical reception among Polish reviewers; among other things, the author was accused of lacking objectivity, being too selective, simplifying certain issues, and even omitting important themes.

**Keywords:** Miłosz, Polish literature, textbook, history of literature, literary criticism

**Słowa kluczowe:** Miłosz, literatura polska, podręcznik, historia literatury, krytyka literacka