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How I Fell in Love with Justine from *On the Banks of the Niemen*. Miłosz Reads Orzeszkowa

1. Introduction

In the early nineties Czesław Miłosz made a sentimental journey to the land of his childhood – his birthplace of Šeteniai. After an absence of nearly fifty years, he had the opportunity to stand again on the bank of the river Nevėžis. He described the experience in *Facing the River*. The poems, published in 1994, touch upon the most significant topics of Miłosz's late poetry. They cover the saving power of memory, the role of poetry, Miłosz's typical autoeroticism, the land of his childhood – the places and people of whom the poet "often thought lovingly."[1]

Among the forty pieces making up the series, the poem *Undressing Justine* deserves particular attention. The text is distinguished from the others by its peculiar layout, combining elements of poetry and prose. Equal status is given to the prose complement to the poem, which performs the function of the author's commentary, a footnote[2]. Indefining the genre of the piece, the principle of the palimpsest may be used; the presence of

[1] Piotr Śliwiński, "Czesław Miłosz: moment i wieczność" [Czesław Miłosz: The Moment and Eternity], *Polonistyka* 1 (2005): 45–50. This and other quotations – unless otherwise indicated – are translated by Sławomir Konkol.

[2] The texts composed of a prose complement to the poem as well as the poem itself appeared in Miłosz's earlier output, e.g. in the poem *Where the Sun Rises and Where It Sets*.

the palimpsest in Miłosz's work is noted for example by Ryszard Nycz[3] and Józef Olejniczak[4]. The latter emphasises the great usefulness of the principle of the palimpsest in studying precisely this poetry[5]. Thanks to the multiplicity of its intertextual references, the palimpsest – the text – complicates its reception by opening itself to different contexts; it broadens the scope of the text's meanings. *Undressing Justine* is a poem entangled in a net of intertextual connections. Interpretation must therefore be wide-ranging and dig deep into both literary and cultural tradition.

2. Who is Justine?

The rather provocative title of the poem reveals a more serious sense-when read together with the complement to the poem, forcing a verification of the interpretative path selected. The word "undressing" may activate different senses, and in combination with the woman's name the range of meanings is only apparently narrowed down to an erotic situation, since the corporeality of the addressee, though important, is only one of the aspects of this "undressing." Undressing as an act of physical experience will not happen here literally, but will only serve as an introduction to a "philological undressing," which consists of revealing the conventions, styles, mentality, determining the ways of reading of the novel *On the Banks of the Niemen*.

The undressing is the first component of the two-part title. The other, equally important component, is Justine herself, to whom the poet refers thus:

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[3] Conf. Ryszard Nycz, „Nostalgia za nieosiągalnym. O późnych poematach Czesława Miłosza" [Nostalgia for the Unattainable. On the Late Poetry of Czesław Miłosz], in *Poznawanie Miłosza 2, część pierwsza 1980–1998* [*Knowing Miłosz 2, part one 1980-1998*], ed. Aleksander Fiut (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2000), 305.

[4] Conf. – palimpsest Józef Olejniczak, *Arkadia i Małe Ojczyzny: Vincenz – Stempowski – Wittlin – Miłosz* [*Arcadiaand Little Homelands: Vincenz – Stempowski – Wittlin - Miłosz*], (Kraków: Oficyna Literacka), 212.

[5] In intertextual methodology the category of palimpsest as a useful tool for studying style provides information on the literary character of a text. According to Olejniczak, in Miłosz's poetry, palimpsest is "a metaphor imprecisely defining the relation of the poet to reality and history, once again confirming the thesis on the historical [...] character of the poetic imagination of the author of *Farther Surroundings*.[…] palimpsest solves the dissonance present in Miłosz's poetry between the essence of the poetic word and the need to tell the story of the history of our age and the individual fates entangled in this history." Conf. Józef Olejniczak, "Czesław Miłosz. Trwoga-sen (1918). Palimpsest [Czesław Miłosz. Terror-Dream (1918)," in *Znajomym gościńcem. Prace ofiarowane: Profesorowi Ireneuszowi Opackiemu* [*On a Familiar Road. Works in Honour Professor Ireneusz Opacki*], ed. Tadeusz Sławek, Aleksander Nawarecki, and Dariusz Pawelec (Katowice: Uniwersytet Śląski, 1993), 158.

> I was reading – I don't know which time – *On the Banks of the Niemen* and I found myself falling in love with Justine. When she looked in the mirror, I was by her side, and it seemed to me that she could see my voyeur's eyes. I was thinking about her, and out of that thinking came a poem, "Undressing Justine."

These words, quoted from the complement to the poem[6] show that Justine Orzelska is the prototype of the textual addressee of Miłosz. Just like Petrarch's Laura, or Shakespeare's Juliet, Justine is a significant name in Polish literature. This is because of Franciszek Karpiński – the father of Polish love poetry, who introduced the figure of Justine into the set of names traditionally associated with pastoral poetry. The heroines of sentimental poetry were village girls, who in fact only serve as a disguise for ladies of the manor. The typical "suspension" of Justine between the two worlds: the world of simple folk culture (the form of sentimental love poems takes inspiration from folk songs) and the sentimental manor culture, fashioned after rural simplicity (the Puławy centre) is reflected in the character created by Eliza Orzeszkowa. In the novel we read:

> The woman bearing flowers could hardly be called a lady from high society, or a girl from the lower strata of the rural population. She looked a bit like both of these. Tall, though significantly shorter than her companion, she was wearing a plain black woollen dress, modest in its design yet expertly tailored, which, while accentuating her shapely and robust figure - broad in the shoulders and slender at the waist - revealed a familiarity with fashion journals and the hand of a skilled tailor. In her upright posture and the delicacy of her complexion, one could also discern an air of refinement and gentility. But on the other hand, her movements and gestures contradicted the overall impression with a hint of impulsiveness and a touch of audacity, and she wore neither a hat nor gloves. Her head was wrapped in an ebony-black braid, and her face, swarthy with crimson lips and large, grey eyes, was boldly exposed to the scorching heat. She rested a cheap, linen parasol on her shoulder, and her rather large, sun-kissed hands betrayed infrequent use of gloves.

[6] Czesław Miłosz, "Undressing Justine," in *New and Collected Poems*, trans. Czesław Miłosz, and Robert Hass (New York: The Ecco Press/HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), 621-622.

> All of this all the more was striking, given the way she held her uncovered head, and arched her dark brows over her grey eyes, which imparted an expression of boldness and pride. In general, this young lady or young woman of about twenty appeared to embody the beauty of a healthy and strong woman, yet one marked by pride and sombreness[7].

The appearance of the heroine indicates that she was created in the likeness of noblewomen, who were characterized as maidens with long braids "the color of ripe wheat." They could also have dark hair – the kind that Justine has. Maidens were depicted as slender, lithe, young, and physically strong. Orzeszkowa notices this characteristic, but Miłosz also reminds us of it by describing the addressee's back as "broad." Equally important in the characterization of this character seems to be the description of her as a beautiful, proud, and sombre woman. This pride and composure – as noted by Karpiński, Orzeszkowa, and finally Miłosz – were perceived exclusively in positive terms. It was a fundamental principle in male-female relationships and characterized young ladies of the manor.

Although literature points to the prototypes of Miłosz's heroine, the interpretative possibilities of answering the question about the identity of Justine are not exhausted.

> While I enter into a union with you, quite amorous.

The relations built by the "I" with his addressee do not appear to be a real experience. The word "quite," along with the following line: "Though you never existed," leave no illusions about the supposed romance. However, the bond that is being formed between the authorial subject and the character of Orzeszkowa's novel is peculiar, because it comes into being at the moment of his reading the book.

> A strange adventure befell me. I was reading – I don't know which time –*On the Banks of the Niemen*,[8]and I found myself falling in love with Justine.

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[7] Eliza Orzeszkowa, *Nad Niemnem* [*On the Banks of the Niemen*] (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1996), 10–11. Conf. also introduction, p. LXXXIII–LXXXIV.

[8] The novel *On the Banks of the Niemen* was written in 1886, during the author's stay in the countryside in Michniewicze, but it was not published in its final form until 1888. The main theme of the work was supposed to be the marriage of Justine Orzelska and Jan Bohatyrowicz - representatives of two different social classes, hence its initial title was to be *Misalliance*. However, Orzeszkowa changed her mindand decided that the central theme would be matters of importance to many generations. The tropeof the January Uprising, evoked in the memories of the

Reading elicits not only aesthetic sensations, but also sensual ones. The reader experiences rapture, not through a real, physical experience of contact with his beloved, but achieved through his communing with the text. Reading awakens the senses and so-called Eros, affects the body, leads to the crossing of the border of the text and the telling of the later fate of the eponymous Justine:

> I was thinking about her, and out of that thinking came a poem, "Undressing Justine."The novel, set in the nineteenth century, was not enough for me, my imagination suggested a later fate for the heroine.

The effect that the text may have on the body is described by Roland Barthes in *S/Z*.[9] Sensual reading involves the notion of an "intertextual nebula," composed of the thoughts and impressions of all the previous acts of reading. Michał Paweł Markowski, a Polish translator of Barthes' work, claims that when we read, our thought "runs outside the text and gets lost in the corridors of memories, other texts, remembered smells and tastes […], fragments of reasonings, ragged quotations, impossible to localise. The text loses its autonomy and disperses in an intertextual nebula."[10] Reading *On the Banks of the Niemen* in this way is related to the concept of motherly reading.

Orzeszkowa's novel awakens erotic feelings towards the textual woman, entangled in intertextual relations with other figures, and other readings. One might therefore find justification for Anna Nasiłowska's claim that "women in this poetry are simply not there, there are only phantasms of women."[11] Miłosz's Justine, an imagined character, is shaped by the repeated rereading of *On the Banks of the Niemen*. The choice of the phantasmatic lover[12] should be unsurprising, since the heroine of the novel

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characters, intertwines in *On the Banks of the Niemen* with the socio-economic conflict that had arisen between the nobility from the manor – the Korczyński family, and the peasantry in the village – the Bohatyrowicz family. The backdrop of the work is the love between Justine and Jan, and their engagement becomes a symbol of reconciliation beyond the class divisions and in the name of higher values that were so dear to the heroes and their ancestors during the January Uprising. An important role in the novel is also played by the idea of the work ethic, which was one of the main slogans promoted by the positivists of the time.

[9] Conf. Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, Vol. 1, trans. Michał Paweł Markowski, and Maria Gołębiewska (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo KR, 1999).

[10] Michał Paweł Markowski, "Wstęp" [Introduction], in Roland Barthes, *S/Z*.

[11] Anna Nasiłowska, "Kobiety w poezji Czesława Miłosza," *Teksty Drugie* 3/4 (2001): 84.

[12] Ibid., 84.

comes from Lithuania, just like Miłosz's Justine. It was in this land that the poet got to taste his first fascination with Eros – his love for a squirrel that he described in *The Land of Ulro*:

> When I was six, my mother bought me a wooden squirrel at a market square. This was in Tartu, then called Dorpat. The little animal, or rather its flat, plywood replica, was auburn-enameled. A trinket. Yet through it I came to know the power of Eros, and even if I never had beheld a woman's face – my insides wrought, swollen with vague longing, or, who knew, with more than longing – I could still have sung the praises of that robust god. I fell in love, simply, and such was the fervor of my emotion then that I still treat it with respect, as something very much above ridicule. […] In love with a wooden squirrel! Later it was with a book illustration, a bird, a poet; a line of words, rhythmically linked. I would even risk the proposition that my Eros was jealous when I addressed my emotions to human beings, that it wished to make me its absolute servant, in love with all things existing, discretely and collectively, much as Constantin Guys, that "paintre de la vie moderne" sung by Baudelaire, was said to be.[13]

as well as his next love, which he recalled years later in his *Alphabet*:

> Love, the first one. Where I was born, the river Nevėžis floats below a plateau, and on the slopes of this sort of gorge the green of manor parks can be seen every couple of kilometers. Not far from Šeteniai, on the other side of the river, right beside Kalnaberžė, stood the Sūriškiai manor, whose name resembles Sirutiškis, once allegedly the property of the Sirutis family, but they are closer to Kėdainiai. […] The elders went to visit Sūriškiai and took me with them. The manor belonged to the Kudrewicz family. They are old nobility, of Lithuanian origin, I believe, because the word *kudra* means a pond in the language. I was, I think, eight. The elders were talking and told a little girl to show me around the park. We walked down paths, crossed some bridges with handrails of birchen perches, and I remember this well. That's when it happened. I was looking at her thin bare shoulders, at the narrowness of her arms above the elbow and an emotion, tenderness, admiration, never before experienced, impossible to name, choked me up. I had no idea that this was called love. I believe she was saying something, explaining, I didn't utter a word, struck by what suddenly came upon me.

[13] Czesław Miłosz, *The Land of Ulro*, trans. Louis Iribarne (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), 29–30.

> She probably had some name, but I know nothing of that. She was probably, like her whole family, taken away to Siberia in 1940. What became of her? […][14].

The memory of the little girl, whose name he no longer remembers, perhaps takes on the figure of Justine, who – as a phantasm – lives her own, "entire" life. Justine is to be "entire," but what does this mean? First of all, she is to be bodily and spiritual, and secondly - temporal, seen in the full dimension of her individual existence (the little girl, the tempting young woman, the old lady), and at the same time well-settled in history (his peer, which is to say she is affected by two cataclysms). Phantasmatically immersed in duration, and because of this "tangible", familiar, close.

3. Philological undressing

*On the Banks of the Niemen*is a novel that most Polish readers would find accessible, but the same might not be said of the reader who is not familiar with Polish culture, the customs of the borderlands, old Polish traditions, and the region's history. Roman Ingarden claims that works of literature may "require appropriate *training* on our part if the developing concretizations of work are to be adequately expressed."[15] If the work becomes incomprehensible to the reader to the extent that they are unable to discover the values concealed within it, it may "die a natural death."[16]

Therefore, Orzeszkowa's novel, an important work in the Polish literary canon, compels Miłosz – a lecturer at Berkeley – to "undress" the text, take it apart so that the meaning of its different elements becomes clear when seen in the appropriate contexts. Otherwise, for foreign readers, Justine will remain nothing more than a "maiden proclaiming equality, à la Georges Sand."

In 19th-century France, following the French Revolution, liberalism and social freedom prevailed (as indicated by the allusive reference to Chopin's lover), and romantic slogans of freedom and equality came to the forefront.

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[14] Czesław Miłosz, *Abecadło* [*Miłosz's Alphabet*] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1997), 181–182.

[15] Roman Ingarden, *The Literary Work of Art*, trans. George G. Grabowicz (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 349.

[16] Ibid., 354.

On the other hand, Lithuania in the nineteenth century is an entirely different world. It is an agricultural country, developmentally backward, oppressed by an occupying force. The political yoke favours the cultivation and upholding of traditions – Sarmatian models. The land of Miłosz's childhood, although it exists in the nineteenth century, upholds the forms of life – customs, mentality, religiosity, even fear of sin – that seem more appropriate to the eighteenth century.

The situation of Justine Orzelska illustrates this well. The heroine of *On the Banks of Niemen*, serving as the prototype of Miłosz's addressee, is a noblewoman. In accordance with the stereotype of a lady of the manor, she is supposed to embody ideals of physical beauty and impeccable moral conduct, with purity being her chief virtue. Young residents of manor houses were therefore referred to as "maidens," a term that unequivocally signified their status as virgins. Maidens of the manor were unfamiliar with the taste of kisses, refrained from declarations of love, and, as a result, never sought the attentions of men. According to the prevailing principles and customs, it was men who contended for their affections, repeatedly professing their love. What the young ladies thought and felt was only disclosed when prompted by a man's declaration. And it was only after it had been decided the couple would marry that the suitor could obtain the consent to kiss his chosen lady. He then kissed the lady's hand, or forfeited this privilege and fell to her feet. Subsequently, they would sit beside each other, "head to head."[17] In this form of love, the primary emphasis rested on the emotions, while the sensual sphere, not to mention the purely physical aspect of love, was reserved for antagonistic characters.

Justine Orzelska breaks the norms set by the manor culture, because, as it turns out, "she did not love Zygmunt[18] with platonic love." Yielding

[17] Conf. Ewa Terling-Śledź, *Mit kresów w prozie Marii Rodziewiczówny*[*The Myth of the Borderland in the Prose of Maria Rodziewiczówna*] (Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu, 2002),145.

[18] Zygmunt Korczyński – the only son of Andrzej, who was the eldest brother of Benedykt Korczyński. Following the tragic demise of his father, he was raised by his mother, Mrs. Andrzejowa, who ensured his thorough education and fulfilled his every desire. It was with him that the adolescent Justine became enamoured. Shared strolls and interests gave rise to mutual fascination between the young couple. This intimacy did not sit well with his mother. Mrs. Andrzejowa felt that Orzelska lacked the appropriate fortune, lineage, and education. At the behest of his mother, young Korczyński abandoned his girlfriend and departed for his studies. After two years, he returned home with a young wife. Zygmunt is a selfish cosmopolitan, disdainful of Polish traditions and rural life. He neither honours his father's memory nor is tied to the family estate. He considers himself an exceptional artist, although he suffers from creative impotence. Perpetually bored, upon his return (now as a married man), he yearns to win

to her passion, she lost her virginal purity, coming close to being a fallen woman.

> The virgin, indeed, represents a pure, untouched, and undisturbed emblem of the creator – God, Nature, or humanity, as each comes into the world virtuous [...] Virginity, therefore, elevates a woman into certain realms of existence from which she cannot descend but only fall. [...] The loss of virginity, in turn, entails the abandonment of narcissism and self-sufficiency by a woman. She ceases to love herself and directs her entire being toward the Other. Surrendering oneself into servitude is a form of atonement for the «fall», the consequences of which are felt in the disdain of men and the mockery of women.[19]

Orzeszkowa, a writer shaped by nineteenth-century Polish culture, treats sensual female eroticism as taboo, and either remains silent about or only subtly hints at "indecent" situations. In her novel, the matter of Justine's romance with Zygmunt, while significant and painful, is discreetly veiled. Meanwhile, Miłosz's speaker – overtly contemporary, formed in the post-sexual revolution era – matter-of-factly brings to light what remains unspoken in the novel, explicitly pointing to defloration:

> [...] Mrs. Orzeszkowa
> Would stop her pen. Your romance with your cousin
> Left to our guesses, the flow of blood,
> Spots on the linen, passed over in silence.
> [...]

The readers' sensual imagination "thinks into being" the missing scenes according to their own wishes. The realness introduced by Miłosz casts Justine from her majestic pedestal and reduces her to the role of a lover[20].

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back Justine; however, she rejects his proposal for a romantic involvement and directs her affections towards Janek Bohatyrowicz.

[19] Krystyna Kłosińska, *Ciało, pożądanie, ubranie* [*Body, Desire, Clothing*] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo „eFKa", 1999, 101, 112.

[20] Justine became a disgraced woman, yet Orzeszkowa passes over this matter in silence, which the perceptive reader – the authorial subject of *Undressing Justine* – interprets as a deliberate concealment of knowledge concerning the "dark" secrets of female nature: the nineteenth-century author "certainly knew much about the dark side of human existence, but she preferred, for reasons she considered superior, not to divulge that knowledge" – see Czesław Miłosz, *Undressing Justine*, 621.

Orzelska, however, was too proud to become the lover of the narcissistic Zygmunt. Hurt and rejected (since he had a wife), she finds love somewhere else – outside the manor. Justine descends towards the people, turns to the peasants – cuts herself off from the manor phantasmagoria, but she does not turn into a liberated heroine who preaches ideals of freedom.

> […]. She arose and «stood before him». For a few seconds, they gazed into each other's eyes as if they were trying to decipher each other's thoughts, then, Jan boldly lifted his head and, extending towards Justine the sickle, in which the sun was casting silver flashes, he softly uttered:
> – Please!
> With her head slightly bowed, she reached out her hand and with a serious smile on her lips, she took the glistening tool from his hand.[21]

The heroine searches for happiness among the provincial nobility, among the peasantry, who do not idle around. Thus she cuts herself off from the manor culture of appearances. Through work she becomes happy, useful, fulfilled. Justine rebels, and in her rebellion breaks with the ages-old manor order. She declares war on the picture of the Polish maiden fixed, for example, by Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz* – a heroine who is faithful and modest, but who does not work. It might seem that Adam Mickiewicz's epic is a farewell to the old customs. Time shows that the customary division of roles into the feminine and the masculine is still in force in Orzeszkowa's novel, just like it was in the days of the author of *Ballads and Romances*. The manor of the nineteenth century, culturally still entangled in the eighteenth century, even though it existed several decades later than Mickiewicz's Soplicowo, still looked unfavourably at young women who rejected the advances of a serious candidate. A lack of understanding and acceptance was also the common reaction to aging unmarried ladies, searching too "aggressively" for a future husband.

A representative of the latter in our culture is beyond doubt Telimena. A figure that, in Miłosz's view, deserves a separate monograph, is not taken

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One might inquire: what were the "superior reasons" that prompted Orzeszkowa to remain silent? Answers must be sought within the mindset of the era, the ideological and artistic program of the writer, within the positivist conception of the human being. The philological "undressing" of Miłosz's text (inspired by the "undressing" of *On the Banks of the Niemen*) leads through various cultural texts – to existential issues, particularly those linked to the pressure of tradition and the constraining influence of societal norms on individual freedom.

[21] Orzeszkowa, *Nad Niemnem*, chapt. III, vol. II.

entirely seriously by the inhabitants of Soplicowo. Miłosz writes thus about her position:

> Telimena was in a situation considered to be proper object of drollery. Unmarried, not a marriageable young girl, she was a loose woman hunting for a husband, and threatened, if the hunt were to be unsuccessful, by the prospect of falling into the category of old maid. This of course was connected with money. Outside the manor, there was no possible source of income. She was a resident at her relatives' place, and she realised that she had little time, that she would either find a way out through marriage or get stuck for good[22].

Just like the character of *On the Banks of the Niemen*, Mickiewicz's heroine breaks the commonly accepted rules. In *Pan Tadeusz*, facing the manor culture takes an entirely different direction than in the case of Miss Orzelska, and has a completely different meaning. Miłosz observes that:

> Telimena's boldness should be somewhat puzzling. Because it goes against the principle embraced at least superficially, condemning women's extramarital sexual relations. Telimena's experience includes the bedroom, and it appears she has a pragmatic approach to them, that is she acknowledges their heterogeneity, since they bring together passion and calculation[23].

Besides the common features shared by the heroines discussed here, there is also significant difference between them. Justine Orzelska's loss of her virginity has cast her from the pedestal of purity and pushed her into the ranks of dishonoured women. Telimena, on the other hand, is not perceived as a dishonoured woman, but a lady of questionable reputation. Mickiewicz's heroine is a partner – a woman with sexual experience. She knows how to take advantage of the knowledge she gains. The poem's Justine has no intention of following in the footsteps of the aging maid from *Pan Tadeusz*. She wants to be a true woman.

In light of nineteenth-century thinking on morality, Telimena was a woman of easy virtue, while Justine was categorized as a dishonoured woman. The realm of female sexuality, both in Orzeszkowa's novel and in Mickiewicz's epic, is, to put it mildly, passed over in silence, overlooked.

[22] Czesław Miłosz, "W stronę kobiet." *Teksty Drugie* (1993): 10–11.
[23] Ibid., 11.

Corporeality – especially of women – was an embarrassing topic, something one did not bring up in conversation. The nineteenth century was an era of shame, of passive femininity, which only the next century could breakout of, receiving the contrasting name of the shameless era. The twentieth century saw great social changes.

In his article *Toward Women* Miłosz remarks that women in the civilisation of the twentieth century began to be perceived only through the categories of the body, which became commodified on an unprecedented scale[24]. Kamila Budrowska, author of the book *The Woman and Stereotypes,* adds that the so-called new woman is a person whose body is subject to constant control and evaluation. She notes that this way women fall prey to aesthetic discrimination.

> "She" means as much as her body. She is to be beautiful, well-groomed, young, rich, wise and feisty. Women begin to take on other roles than that of a mother. They become part of the society, entering the sphere of public activity[25].

The era from which the subject of *Undressing Justine* is speaking is an era in which everything that could be done with the human body has been done. This is why he says she has "no reason to be ashamed in front of me," because he belongs to a shameless time. The twentieth century terrifies, above all by revealing that which used to be a mystery. The human being as a person disintegrates, becomes a commodity, loses subjecthood[26]. Miłosz reminds us that this era is a time of threat especially to women. A time when:

> prostitution took on a new form of selling one's appearance (model, film star, porn star). Magazines devoted to female nudity have gone all the way from strip-tease, that is, from undressing, up to the point where nothing can be undressed anymore, so all that is left is to point the camera between the legs[27].

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[24] Ibid., 11.

[25] Kamila Budrowska, *Kobieta i stereotypy. Obraz kobiet w prozie polskiej po roku 1989* (Białystok: Wydawnictwo Trans Humana, 2000), 12.

[26] Sławomir Jankowski, *Świat wartości. Problematyka aksjologiczna w eseistyce Bolesława Micińskiego, Jerzego Stempowskiego i Czesława Miłosza* [*The World of Values. Problems of Axiology in Essays of Bolesław Miciński, Jerzy Stempowski and Czesław Miłosz*] (Wrocław: Erechtejon, 2002), 96.

[27] Miłosz, *W stronę kobiet*, 8.

The author of *The Second Space* alls the twentieth century a time of "collapse of values and desacralization of history,"[28] a time when the body has lost its sanctity and become a tool used for earning money. Perhaps, going against people of the shameless era, he utters these words:

Yet for me your fleshliness, Justine,
Is important, you have to appear entire

"The shine of cognition and self-cognition brightens practically all the love encounters in Miłosz's work."[29]This shine accompanies the author in *Undressing Justine*. The addressee is to "appear entire," multidimensional, perceived in her psychological, metaphysical, and ethical aspects. The completeness of Justine is thus to be composed of truly noble features: "pride and angry integrity," which were so valued in the nineteenth century, are supposed to amaze, invite reflection: "Where do they come from?" Miłosz's question concerns motivations first and foremost. Thus the poet once again invokes an old Polish tradition – that of a proud and moody maiden, who is also strong and helps her man – as his companion.

The motif of the soul's conversation with the body, dating back to the early Middle Ages (here significantly reversed – as the order implies, it is not the soul speaking to the body, but the body conversing with the soul: "[W]hat dialogues go on between the body and soul") broadens the figure by a metaphysical dimension, situating it in the circle of thinking, feeling beings, endowed with higher ambitions.

4.The conclusion of Justine's story

Justine, the phantasm of a reading, embodied in numerous concretisations as a compatriot-lover, begins to live her own life outside the world of the novel. Miłosz writes the events of her later life, based on a scenario dictated by history. Like most Lithuanian noble women, Justine (Mother of the House, Polish Mother, and Mater Dolorosa) experiences the end of the world[30]:

[28] Jankowski, *Świat wartości,* 89.

[29] Fiut, *Moment wieczny*, 192.

[30] September 17th, 1939 is the moment when Soviet forces appropriated the eastern lands of the Second Polish Republic. Conf. Jacek Kolbuszewski, *Kresy*[*Borderland*] (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, 2004), 207. Miłosz presents this moment in the following words: "A great terror fell on the Poles. Deportations began. Some managed to

In floury snow you see sledges, convoys of sledges.
You hear the shouts of soldiers, women's laments.
And you know, feel, that this is how it looks, the end
Of one earthly country. Never again an echo
Of a song sung on the Niemen, the flight of swallows,
Never again fruit harvests in the village orchards.
The bars of cattle cars slam, one after another.

They carry you, by ancient trails, to the land of shadows and murder.

> And wax encrusts sconces and nations trade and whales dance near Lahaina and the ungrateful generations raise their buildings and French policemen get new capes and the sun rises once again, and…

The heroine's later life is arranged by Miłosz according to the national paradigm until its end. Until the end of the world! In the stanza above, attention should be devoted to the syntax (a series of enumerated items linked by the conjunction "and") and the cosmic-apocalyptic imagery. The oxymoron of "wax encrusting sconces" (in the original, "wosk spływa soplami," literally "the wax flows down in icicles") introduces two motifs characteristic for the poetry of the thirties (wax as a signifier of a ritual candle, icicle as a signifier of winter and ice), motifs that build the semantic field of death. The whale brings to mind the Leviathan (the biblical Satan, the monstrous political state), "ungrateful generations" – the rebirth of evil. This allusive imagery refers us to the catastrophism of the thirties (*Three Winters*), to *Rescue* and also – to Miłosz's *opus magnum* – to the volume *Where the Sun Rises and Where It Sets*. The multiplicity of intertextual references lends this vision the character of an apocalyptic synthesis.

Let us recall *A Song on the End of the World*:

[…]
On the day the world ends
Women walk through the fields under their umbrellas,
A drunkard grows sleepy at the edge of a lawn,
[…]
And those who expected lightning and thunder
Are disappointed.

escape, even though *Rota* was being sung: 'We won't forsake the land we came from…' The exodus had taken place." Conf. Czesław Miłosz, *Szukanie Ojczyzny* [*In Search of a Homeland*] (Kraków: Znak, 1996), 232.

And those who expected signs and archangels' trumps
Do not believe it is happening now.
[…].
Only a white-haired old man, who would be a prophet
Yet is not a prophet, for he's much too busy,
Repeats while he binds his tomatoes:
There will be no other end of the world,
There will be no other end of the world.
(v. *Rescue* 1945)

Brought up in the Christian tradition, which shaped our imagination of the end of the world through *The Apocalypse of St. John*, we are unable to understand that the judgement day has already come[31]. The "trading nations" of *Undressing Justine* are not unlike the "vegetable peddlers" of *Song*; the "yellow-sailed boat" and the "whales dancing" from the text under discussion here constitute the space of the final day. Evil – the whale – the Leviathan – roams the world, but still people live as if they are unaware of what is happening.

Justine herself reminds us of the old man from *A Song on the End of the World*, both of them knowing, sensing that the long-since announced "now" is happening. Because in reality the world ends every day, in every minute.

In Miłosz's work, catastrophism, understood in this manner, always taking on an eschatological dimension, is different from the catastrophism of the thirties, as well as from its later incarnation, the generation of the war poets, the poets of the occupation. Rather than creating apocalyptic visions of a world coming to an end, Miłosz presents the end as an aspect of mundane reality which has to be embraced. This thought also returns in the poem *Where the Sun Rises and Where It Sets*, to which the poem discussed here refers ("the sun rises once more and…"). The poem concludes with this vision of the Final Judgement[32]:

And if the city, there below, was consumed by fire
Together with the cities of all the continents,
I would not say with my mouth of ashes that it was unjust.

[31] Bożena Chrząstowska, *Poezje Czesława Miłosza* [*The Poems of Czesław Miłosz*](Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne, 1982), 103–110.

[32] Ibid.,107.

For we lived under the Judgment, unaware.
[…]

The catastrophism of Miłosz went through various evolutions in his work. In this Californian poem, as well as in *The Land of Ulro* – as Joanna Zach puts it – his catastrophism reaches "the deepest religious and catastrophic interpretation." It did not appear suddenly and did not disappear with the end of the war, because the war was only a manifestation of a crisis that has continued for several hundred years:

> As a young man I was struck by the magnitude of what was occurring in my century, a magnitude equaling, perhaps even surpassing the decline and fall of antiquity[…] – wrote the poet in late seventies – […] brought my thoughts to bear on language, on Polish poetry, and on individual poets, I was against narrowing the argument to questions of craft and thus ignoring the great paramount theme. Yet I lacked the tools to handle that theme, nor am I much better equipped now. Today I am awed by the violence of my prewar poetry, a violence of tone born of a disproportion between the matter conveyed and the imagery to match it[33].

The catastrophism of Miłosz is displayed on many planes, and concerns both the visions of the end of the world, of different visions of civilization, and even refers to the mortality of speech, which Miłosz diagnosed during his reckoning with the literature of the twentieth century. Therefore, as Aleksander Fiut claims, it belongs to the sphere of ideological phenomena, and concerns poetics too.

The two works quoted here, including *Undressing Justine*, constitute Miłosz's turn towards the poetics of the Żagary group. Aleksander Wat attempted a comparison between this attitude and that of his own generation:

> The catastrophism of your generation happened in the conditions of, on the one hand, Stalinism, and on the other – Hitlerism. You were caught, especially in Poland, in these scissors. You also had a sense, perhaps even more profound, that an era had ended, the world had ended, civilization was impossible, and yet you were caught between these monsters of enormous force and dynamism […][34].

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[33] Miłosz, *The Land of Ulro*, 6-7.

[34] Aleksander Wat quoted in Aleksander Fiut – conf. Aleksander Fiut, *Moment wieczny. Poezja Czesława Miłosza* [*The Eternal Moment. The Poetry of Czesław Miłosz*] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo literackie, 1998), 247.

The poetics of Miłosz in this period represent the consequences of the crisis that was to come from Hitler's Germany, and from the side of the other monster – Russia. The poem *Undressing Justine* is a return to the vision of the end of the world as the annihilation of all existence and the Final Judgement, which appears in the poem *Where the Sun Rises and Where It Sets*. Because here we have Justine, as an individual whose fate has been arranged from beginning to end, become a synonym of the universal – the fate of all Lithuanians. Miłosz – as always – implements the principle of poetic imagery: from the detail to the whole. This feature of his poetry means that the fate of an individual person (object) provides the material for reflection on the entirety of existence[35].

Miłosz's addressee thus becomes a synonym for the inhabitants of Lithuania, whose history ended on September 17th, 1939. It harbingers the beginning of the epic of the exiles, which had continued – according to Józef Olejniczak – for as long as three hundred years (Poland's unending drama). The heroine is thus also a synonym of the poet – a Lithuanian who, like hundreds of thousands of people, was deprived of his place on earth – his home; who became an exile. Miłosz obsessively questions his own roots, and his search for home is a fundamental principle that organises his late poetry. "Rootedness" becomes a superior goal[36]:

> «Rootedness is, perhaps, the most important and best known need of the human soul. At the same time, this is a need that it usually difficult to determine. Human beings have roots, provided of course that they participate actively and naturally in the existence of a community preserving some treasures of the past and endowed with a sense of tomorrow»[37].

To conclude, one must note that the provocative "undressing" of the poem's titleis in fact perverse, since – while encouraging associations with an erotic situation – in reality it entirely overlooks the act of physical sensation. The poet does not undress the woman, but rather his own

[35] Conf. Joanna Zach, *Miłosz i poetyka wyznania* [*Miłosz and the Poetics of Confession*] (Kraków: Universitas, 2002), 267.

[36] Quoted in **J**ó**zef** Olejniczak, "Czesław Miłosz. Trwoga-sen (1918). Palimpsest," in *Znajomym gościńcem. Prace ofiarowane: Profesorowi Ireneuszowi Opackiemu*, ed. Tadeusz Sławek, Aleksander Nawarecki, and Dariusz Pawelec (Katowice: Uniwersytet Śląski, 1993), 155.

[37] Quotation after Olejniczak, "Czesław Miłosz," 155.

spiritual autobiography, rooted in identical space. The fundamental question is the one of his own identity.

> Who was I? Who am I now, years later, here on Grizzly Peak, in my study overlooking the Pacific?[38]

These are the issues to which Miłosz returns ceaselessly, as he does here – in the text discussed in the present article, onto which a network of intertextual relations is imposed. Numerous references – to seventeenth-century culture, to the customs of the borderland, to the twentieth century – are an attempt to answer the question – Where am I from? The cultural, philological "undressing" of the textual "lover" is another act of writing one's own identity. Autobiography, typical of late Miłosz, his "writing himself."

Angelika Matuszek

Abstract

The article *How I Fell in Love with Justine from On the Banks of the Niemen. Miłosz Reads Orzeszkowa* is an attempt at an intertextual analysis of the poem *Undressing Justine.* The text, which comes from the 1994 volume *Facing the River* attracts attention for two reasons. First, the layout of the work itself is intriguing: apart from the poem itself it includes a prose *Complement…*, which performs the function of the author's commentary or footnote. Second, the title itself provokes the reader, offering various associations, of which the primary are erotic. However, intertextual analysis reveals a more serious senseand demonstrates that undressing is merely a pretext for a "philological undressing," which consists of baring conventions, styles, and traditions of the era.

Keywords: Miłosz, Orzeszkowa, Justine, Undressing, Identity

Słowa kluczowe: Miłosz, Orzeszkowa, Justyna, rozbieranie, tożsamość

[38] Zach, *Miłosz i poetyka,* 262–263.