

TOMASZ BILCZEWSKI

## ***A FLY TRAPPED IN AMBER. ON CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ'S AMERICA AND HIS IMAGINATION***

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**Abstract:** This article aims to examine selected historical contexts of Miłosz's encounters with America. Its purpose is to demonstrate that the poet's attitude towards the country where he spent many years of his adulthood and creative life was full of conflicts, paradoxes and contrasts. Early readings, a boyhood passion for discovering the laws and secrets of nature, and Romantic and modern literary traditions significantly influenced both Miłosz's perception of American landscapes and American culture, shaping new landscapes within him. The transformations of the speaking "I," which the reader witnesses through Miłosz's experiences with the New World, allow for an understanding of how his unique spatial imagination developed. This article also attempts to indicate areas where Miłosz searches for a solution to his disintegrated imagination, particularly in its religious dimension, while tackling the challenges and crises of modernity.

**Keywords:** Miłosz, America, spatial imagination, religious imagination

### **1. Romantic and modern**

Let me start by evoking a description of a certain landscape:

The two banks of the Meschacebe present the most extraordinary picture. On the western shore, savannahs spread out as far as the eye can see, and their verdant swells, receding in the distance, seem to rise into the blue of the sky where they fade from view. In these endless prairies herds of three or four thousand wild buffaloes wander about aimlessly. Occasionally a bison heavy with years breasts the waves and finds repose among the high grasses of some island in the Meschacebe. By his brow crowned with twin crescents, by his ancient, muddy

beard, he might be taken for the god of the river, casting a satisfied eye over the grandeur of his waters and the wild abundance of his shores.

Such is the scene on the western bank; but it changes on the opposite side, and the two shores form an admirable contrast. Overhanging the streams, grouped together on rocks and mountains and scattered in the valleys, trees of every shape, of every hue and every odor, grow side by side and tangle together as they tower up to heights which weary the eye. Wild vines, bignonias and colocynths, twine around the foot of these trees, scale the boughs and crawl out to the tips of the branches, swinging from the maple to the tulip tree and from the tulip tree to the hollyhock, forming a thousand bowers, a thousand vaults and a thousand porticoes. (...) From the heart of these clumps the magnolia raises its motionless cone; capped with great white blossoms, it commands the entire forest, with no other rival than the palm tree, which gently waves its verdant fans beside it. (...)

While in the savannahs beyond the river everything is permeated with silence and calm, here, on the contrary, everything stirs and murmurs (Chateaubriand 1980: 18–19).

This is how François René de Chateaubriand begins his *Atala* of 1801, a peculiar literary distillation which brings together imagined landscapes of the Mississippi River Basin and experiences from a trip that lasted almost half a year. In the preface to the first edition of this book, Chateaubriand assured his readers that he depicted American natural landscapes with *la plus scrupuleuse exactitude*, and in *Le Voyage en Amérique* (1826) he attempted to describe a purported journey from Ohio to the South; nonetheless, it is well known that between April and December 1791 he actually travelled from Baltimore to Philadelphia, and his images of both banks of the Mississippi were reminiscences of a purely imaginary itinerary, based on his readings of travel documents left behind by explorers and missionaries. *Atala* is one of a whole series of works which recorded the experience of “American exoticism” in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a genre represented in Polish literature by the writings of such authors as Kajetan Węgierski, Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz, and later Henryk Sienkiewicz, whose *Listy z podróży do Ameryki* (Portrait of America) particularly intrigued Miłosz. None of these testimonies, however, had the same resonance and the same peculiar *effet d’anchantement* as *Atala*, with its images of wild and lush nature, and its juxtaposition of the world of Christian values with the ways of the local Native American tribes. Above all, however, in many cultures of the Old Continent this story prompted an incred-

ibly strong consolidation of the images of the immensity and power of American spaces. Their foreignness, indifference, and “stone-like eternity,” matched against the overwhelming fragility of human beings plunged in these spaces, made Miłosz, and many others whom fate sent across the ocean, feel “stripped and destitute” (Miłosz 1982: 10). In Miłosz’s works, we often find humility and respect for the immensity of nature which manifested itself in these spaces; these are juxtaposed with the familiar qualities of his native landscapes, and with a world on a human scale. Miłosz used these words to describe his encounter with the uncanny:

The streets of Paris have given me much happiness, as have the valleys and hills of the French provinces, where a slate roof in a cluster of green, a field, a footbridge, a grove, almost burst with the density of their unique, particular existence, every kilometer abounding with things to see and touch. This is not the same as zooming down three hundred miles of California freeways situated amid menacing monstrous vistas, the light lurid on the bare mountains. There is nothing equally exalted, equally grandiose in Europe; its wildest panoramas are small and tame by comparison. However, I remember that the longing for wild, romantic landscapes was the creation of an artistic and literary fashion; people were not intoxicated by them when their fields were surrounded by forests nearly untouched by the ax; on the contrary, it was a pacified, submissive nature that was venerated (Miłosz 1982: 38).

The majestic landscape, which for Chateaubriand belonged to the Romantic exploration of nature’s mysteries, and which he recorded in keeping with the characteristically Romantic aesthetics of the sublime, was filtered through the experience of modernity by Miłosz, who wrote the following in his *Notatnik amerykański* (American Notebook):

pusta równina aż do granic nieba, zarasta ją trawa niebiesko-zielona. Po długich szosach, prostych jak sine igły, śmigają małe mechaniczne pojazdy. A nad równiną, na tle nieba, wymijają nas rytmicznie przezroczyste wieże z cienkiej stali (Miłosz 1999: 35).

an empty plain, stretching all the way to the boundaries of the sky, overgrown with blue-green grass. Small mechanical vehicles flit along long roads, straight as gray needles. And over the plain, against the sky, translucent towers made of thin steel rhythmically pass us.

(trans. A.M. and T.B.)

In this text, recorded images appear side by side with reflections on landscapes of Breughel, Watteau, and Miłosz's beloved Claude Lorraine; yellow and violet ocean mists, and lines of ships, which mix their smoke with the smoke patterns of the evening sea, are accompanied by reflections on the perception of the beauty of large agglomerations of people, which Charles Baudelaire termed "the painting of manners." The boundless theatre of red rocks quickly turns into the vast urban spaces of New York City; reflections on the capacity of human perception and the limits of art and language turn into depictions of civilisation as a terrain where conflicting elements clash with one another. Like Chateaubriand, who wrote of the two contrasting banks of the Mississippi and depicted a country of Native Americans and Christian missionaries, Miłosz often described his American experiences as the coexistence of opposing forces and phenomena, whether speaking about the world of nature, or stepping over its boundaries. Even though the author of *Kontynenty* (Continents) spoke explicitly of America's Romantic inheritance, which he himself connected in part with *Atala*, it is worth examining the specifics of his first encounter with American exoticism, originally made possible by the work of the imagination. A distant echo of this encounter would later appear in the above-mentioned *Notatnik amerykański*, where a desert landscape observed from an aeroplane window suddenly changes into "kraj Dzikiego Zachodu z dziecinnej opowieści, wrzasku atakujących Indian, postoju płóciennych bud w karłowatych krzakach" [the Wild West of childhood stories, with the cries of attacking Indians, and canvas-covered carriages stopped among dwarf shrubbery; trans. A.M. and T.B.] (Miłosz 1999: 36). In "A Treatise on Poetry, besides the America which looks with the eyes of a raccoon's black binoculars, where ivy and vines tangle in the red soil/ At the roots of an arcade of tulip trees, America also appears as the complement to childhood tales about the heart of tanglewood,/ Told in the evening to the spinning wheel's hum" (Miłosz 2001b: 146).

To understand Miłosz's early encounter with America, it is absolutely essential to recall the moment when, as a ten-year-old, he discovered a chest of his father's treasures, which contained some novels by Thomas Mayne Reid, a writer whom Miłosz described as a "rather rare case of an author whose fame, short-lived where he could be read in the original, has survived through translations:"

(...) I remember climbing a steep street with a strange name, Mała Pohulanka (Little Spree), in Wilno with a book by Reid under my arm: the sleeve of my

sheepskin coat, the belt clasping my sheepskin, gray winter weather, boys in the middle of the street gliding down stretched out on their sleds, steering with one leg. Such details are fixed in our memories as if at the moment of perception they were colored by a strong emotion (Miłosz 1977: 145 and 154).

It was thanks to Reid, among others, that Miłosz, struggling with his resistance to the Cyrillic alphabet, gained his characteristic sensitivity for detail in the natural world. In Reid's work he found an incredible wealth of landscapes and living beings, and a literary taxonomy lesson, since a precise Latin name, placed in parentheses, was given each of these beings. He valued a similar approach in the work of Włodzimierz Korsak, who imitated Reid, and who wrote hunting books for young people, peculiar lessons about nature, which Miłosz studied as earnestly as the works of the zoologists Władysław Taczanowski and Jan Sztolcman. He saw Reid's and Fenimore Cooper's writing as complementing the images from *Atala*, and as a source of "the romantic appeal of America, and of the legend of virgin forests, prairies, mustangs, and buffalo" (Miłosz 1977: 155).

Miłosz's attitude towards nature in the New World, with which he was particularly preoccupied, and his attitude towards nature in general, does not admit easy generalisations; on the one hand, nature aroused fear, as it did, for example, when he looked at pine trees by Feather River, or when he stood on "rocky promontories spattered by the ocean's white explosions; on the other hand, it fitted over [him] smoothly as the America of trees and plants, fragrant with the hay reaped on forest meadows," the America of hollows, of the hidden presence of salmon and bear, of encounters with the porcupines and beavers of Pennsylvania, and the forests of Vermont and Maine (Miłosz 1982: 10 and 1981: 260–261). This duality also characterised the internal landscapes in which he dwelt across the ocean, and after many years it became manifest in the summary of his American experience, expressed in the concise form of his *ABC*'s:

America. What splendor! What poverty! What humanity! What inhumanity!  
 What mutual goodwill! What individual isolation! What loyalty to the ideal!  
 What hypocrisy! What a triumph of conscience! What perversity! The America  
 of contradictions can, not must, reveal itself to immigrants who have made it  
 here. Those who have not made it will see only its brutality (Miłosz 2001a: 25).

By revealing both its sensory and its spiritual topography to the émigré, the New World absorbed him and forced him to metamorphosise; let us recall

how he spoke of the majestic space of the Pacific Coast, which permeated him, remade him, deprived him of something, and simultaneously had a “liberating” effect (Miłosz 1982: 10), thereby creating a new mental and emotional map. To understand its contours and the subjective cartography of the admirer of maps from *Native Realm*, we must once again return to his childhood years.

## 2. Micro and macro: spatial imagination

In his 1980 Nobel lecture Miłosz described one of his most important formative experiences – his childhood reading of Selma Lagerlöf’s *Wonderful Adventures of Nils*, who “flies above the earth and sees it in every detail” (Miłosz 1991: 273). Miłosz would find a similar metaphor for the poet’s vocation in Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski’s work, who uses the form of the classical ode to describe a journey from Vilnius to Brussels on the back of a Pegasus, allowing him to create two types of maps – distant and concrete (e.g., in *City Without a Name*, Sarbiewski’s Pegasus is transformed into griffins and dragons). In *Native Realm* Miłosz would find – as if playing with the images in his own translation of Blake’s *Milton* – a “new organ, the telescopic eye” (Miłosz 1981: 2) to express this standpoint of the subject who steps beyond himself, a standpoint which could be described by Helmuth Plessner’s notion of the “eccentric man.” This telescoping eye would be capable of simultaneously grasping various points around the earth and various points in time. The filter of modernity, however, steers us away from the Romantic contexts of this metaphor, since it is connected, as the author’s subsequent commentary suggests, with cinematographic montage technique. This motif of seeing up close and from afar was to accompany the poet throughout almost his entire life. Our concern is less with tracing motifs, however, than with the fact that this geographic *topos* in Miłosz’s work makes it possible to single out the essential quality of his imagination and his poetic language: his use of categories based on spatial relationships, a result of his privileging the sense of sight, or his ocular-centrism (van Heuckelom 2011: 909–939). Even though this goes back to the experiences of a child who imagined Nils looking down on the Earth from the flying Pegasus, it was the perspective of American spaces and the feeling he experienced when facing a territory of such immensity that led

to a radically new accumulation of spatial metaphors and their employment to mark a subjective identity:

The human imagination is spatial and it is constantly constructing an architectonic whole from landscapes remembered or imagined; it progresses from what is closest to what is farther away, winding layers or strands around the single axis, which begins where the feet touch the ground. Many consequences flow from the spatial nature of the imagination, and I will return to them frequently (Miłosz 1982: 6–7).

In later passages of *Visions from San Francisco Bay*, Miłosz leads us towards other Californian territories, and the frequent return of spatial metaphors resembles an outright obsession, encompassing expanding realms of experience:

This happens because we are physical beings; that is, we occupy space, and the space we occupy, bounded by the surface of our skin, cannot be located in a “nowhere.” Just as our hand reaches out and picks up a pencil lying on a table, thus establishing a relationship between our body and what is outside it, our imagination extends us, establishing a sensory and visual relationship between us and a street, a town, a district, and a country. In exiles from the Eastern part of Europe one often notices a desperate refusal to accept that fact; they try to preserve their homeland as an ideal space in which they dwell and move, yet since it exists only in memory and is not reinforced by everyday impressions, it becomes rigid, transformed into words that grow more obstinate the more their tangible contents fade (Miłosz 1982: 204).

Here Miłosz touches upon the issue of the exile's identity, which inexorably evokes references to spatial metaphors tied to the condition of a transposed subject; his passion for establishing spatial relationships goes much deeper, however. It was already perceptible when, as a young naturalist, he “collected May bugs asphyxiated by formalin fumes and impaled on pins;” this is the passion for organising the unfathomable richness of nature, through which the concrete detail in an experience begins to inhabit “an ideal space outside of time” (Miłosz 1982: 17–18). As Miłosz himself wrote in *Visions*: “There was a furious Aristotelianism in that will to catalogue; I was repeating the procedures of ordering the world around me, as if childhood, boyhood, and youth did in fact correspond to the phases through which humanity passes” (Miłosz 1982: 18). A bit further on, he describes the end of his love affair with Linnaean taxonomy, which transformed real birds into the illustrations of an anatomy atlas, covered with the illusion of

feathers, and which made the vividness and the scent of flowers into “a set of characteristics” that “falls under the sway of statistics” (Miłosz 1982: 19). When he throws away his boyhood herbals, a certain stage of ordering the world through words comes to an end, and ideal, extra-temporal space is also relegated to the past. The maintenance of stubborn divisions which reduce diversity to ideal types and invariables is replaced by an assent to “the fluid and the undefined,” most clearly perceptible in the stupefaction experienced by the subject when (referring to *spruce, pine, and fir trees*) he confronts the unparalleled abundance of species, constantly juxtaposed with what was once reducible to a single instance. Miłosz’s need to structure the abundance of phenomena and the multiplicity of sensory perceptions was to change with the passage of time, but it never left him; he himself emphasised that it was particularly strong in him: “We are nourished by our senses, and whether we are aware of it or not, the process of ordering our chaotic perceptions and composing them into definite units is constantly at work in us” (Miłosz 1982: 174 and 203). With the American experience, this work enters a new phase, and the difficulties of moving from what is precisely defined, i.e., from strong Aristotelianism to what is fluid and based on scalar conceptualisations, get transposed into the need to constantly reconfigure his own mental and emotional cartography.

### ***3. New eyes, new thought, new distance***

Transformations of this cartography did not arise solely from being an exile, but also from broader historical and civilisational transformations of human spatial imagination over the course of the last century. Miłosz described these in detail in his essay “Religion and Space,” showing how traditional hierarchical relations between top and bottom – which determine our sense of being at home in the world – suffered a breakdown; and how Dante’s symbols, reflecting the world view of St. Thomas Aquinas, had stopped serving their function in “dispersal and chaos,” in the context of a space where there is no “one Place to which all others are related, and where the subject faces an infinity of relationships,” which are “always relative only to each other,” where he or she is forced to grasp at the only tangible refuge – the “I” – an uncertain refuge, suspended among many other shards of space, and situated in time which stretches back into infinity, from “gaseous nebulae condensing into liquids and solid bodies” to the

molecules “of life-begetting acid” (Miłosz 1982: 31–32). When faced with the immensity of this scale, the imagination cannot remain indifferent; it enters a state of crisis, of confrontation between the old and the new:

The old; that is, space conceived by the imagination as an infinitely extended, all-embracing body in which the chunks of manifold worlds are stuck like raisins in a cake. The new means space-creating movement, for, since space is relative and not absolute, why would we ascribe to it the features of a cake or an elephant and be amazed by its grandeur? (Miłosz 1982: 34).

Miłosz realised that it would not be easy for him to abandon Newton, that he had to keep carrying on the work which would make it possible to overcome the limits of the traditional imagination, to his very last moment:

Nevertheless, when here at night in these hills, near the brightly illuminated atomic laboratory where experiments beyond my understanding are conducted, I analyze my imagination, I realize that it is no longer entirely of the nineteenth century and that, in any case, I have been freed from an image of space as a solid body and container (Miłosz 1982: 35).

One might wonder whether the poet was actually able to achieve this liberation, to what extent his imagination in fact shifted from the nineteenth century, how paralysed he became by the anxiety that departing from certain imaginings of the world would submerge the subject in a numbing chaos, where the helpless imagination, and especially the religious imagination, reaches a peculiar impasse: faced with “the collapse of traditional norms” and their representations, we realize their insufficiency, but we nonetheless behave “as if everything religion, the guardian of mystery, teaches us were the truth” (Miłosz 1982: 79). According to Miłosz, this happens because human beings cannot find their feet without an anchor:

The endless space fashioned by the imagination can be compared to the fabric of a tent, which is either taut or slack and flapping in the wind. God, as a central point to which all space could be related, makes the fabric taut. (...) If neither God nor earthly goods nor a collective enterprise provides directional tension, space is inert, directionless, and soon colorless as well. For that reason, as well, love is the only salvation in the literature of boredom and alienation; all space forms around the one person who takes the place of God (Miłosz 1982: 168).

The grief and bitterness of this modern man who had experienced the breakdown of the imagination based on the Newtonian notion of the world as an all-encompassing container, who was deprived of rootedness in

a place and frightened by the vision of the cosmic terror of infinite matter, was alleviated through the visionary writings of Oscar Miłosz, who allegedly experienced illumination in 1914, and intuitively grasped the theory of relativity. This revelation made it possible to treat space as a relationship between one motion and another, as a principle to unite space, time, and matter, as the essence of both the most abstract operations of the mind and the pulsing of the blood in our veins. Various reconfigurations of ideas derived from Oscar Miłosz appear and reappear in the younger Miłosz's writings with remarkable frequency. My goal here is not to organise them or to reconstruct Miłosz's interpretation of hermetic metaphysical poems, which can be found, for example, in his essay *The Young Man and the Mysteries* or in *The Land of Ulro*. I will, however, use fragments from his long poem *The Rising of the Sun* to show how the spatiality of the sensory world harmonises with the spatiality of the spiritual world in Miłosz's works. The former type of spatiality is exemplified by Lauda from the poem written in 1974 – the poet's concrete homeland, with its diverse nationalities and religions, a characteristic geographic “minute particular,” which takes the form of a projection of one's own memory, stirred by the power of the imagination. Through this imagination, Lauda also becomes a spiritual space resembling the Jerusalem of the Psalms and of the Apocalypse, or Blake's world, which Los liberates from the ravages of time (Dudek 1995: 75–100). Here we encounter images of amber and the alchemist; the former was the ancient stone of the Lithuanians, the gold of the north, which symbolized love and the sun, while the latter is endowed with all the qualities of a spiritual master. We can surmise that the figure of the alchemist points to Oscar Miłosz, whose *Épître à Storge*, partially translated in *The Land of Ulro*, and also evoked in *Native Realm* (Miłosz 1984: 196–205 and 1981: 174–175), is mentioned in Miłosz's introduction to Lauda, when he discusses the fundamental principle at the core of all human feelings, actions, and thoughts: the perception of space, which is at the root of the longing to be anchored in the world and to situate everything one registers and experiences. This principle holds the source of Miłosz's spatial imagination, his sensuality and spirituality. An imagination which abides by this principle makes it possible to break free from the illusions of the land of Ulro, in order to search for a stable point of reference, an internal place for places. Over time, the image of the magical Lithuanian stone that appears in the poem clearly becomes a symbol of the unification of what has been dispersed (Miłosz 2011: 651 and 2001b: 299):

A teraz jesteśmy złączeni w obrzędzie.  
 W kryształach? w bursztynie? muzykowanie.  
 Ani to co było, ani to co będzie,  
 Tylko to co jest, kiedy świat ustanie.

And now we are joined in a ritual.  
 In amber? In crystal? We make music.  
 Neither what once was nor what ever will be.  
 Only what persists when the world is over.

Amber serves as an image that unifies the composition of the poem, in which, at one point, the space of native Lithuania expands to include California, located on the other side of the ocean. This image returns unexpectedly in *Visions from San Francisco Bay*, but it is transformed: this time we see “a fly trapped in amber” (Miłosz 1982: 182).<sup>1</sup> This is an image which accompanies a man whose imagination, unable to attach itself to the loss of direction, becomes subordinated to laws of circularity, of eternal return. California, which is repeatedly compared to the spaces of his native Lithuania, causes Miłosz's geography of the subject to undergo a metamorphosis, changing the nature of the accepted observation point: “But I did not like my own regal soarings above the earth. That had been forced upon me and deserved to be called by its name, exile” (Miłosz 1982: 90). In *Visions*, we find a similar projection of an external landscape onto the internal one (Miłosz 2000: 6):

W istocie przedmiot tej książki nie jest określony geograficznie. Jest nim świadomość i wyobrażenia w spotkaniu z problemami i obrazami, które pozostały nienazwane i domagają się przeniesienia w język. W rezultacie zamiast reportażu otrzymujemy wyprawę w głąb siebie, wewnętrzny portret kogoś, komu wypadło żyć w epoce globalizacji i pierwszego lądowania człowieka na Księżycu.

Essentially, the subject of this book is not geographically determined. It consists of awareness and imagination encountering problems and images which have remained unnamed, and which demand to be transposed into language. As a result, instead of reportage, we get a journey within, an internal portrait of someone who happened to live in the era of globalization and humankind's first landing on the moon.

(trans. A.M. and T.B)

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<sup>1</sup> In “The Garden of Earthly Delights” from *Unattainable Earth*, Miłosz once again returns to the image of a fly trapped in amber: *The twentieth century is drawing to its close. I will be immured in it like a fly in amber* (Miłosz 1986: 3).

One could say much more about how the need to locate experiences in space affected Miłosz's imagination and poetic language, how it affected his characteristic spatialisation of time, history, and spiritual experience, how it formed his specific *geopoetics* and *autobiogeography*, to evoke categories utilised by Elżbieta Rybicka, who described Miłosz as a *homo geographicus* (Rybicka 2011).

In place of a conclusion, I will take the liberty of saying a few words about how Miłosz's experience of America was related to his perception of space. Miłosz treated America as a particularly privileged territory, which has long been "the testing ground for all mankind," the training field for confronting existential homelessness; "for who besides the Indians was not an alien" (Miłosz 1982: 206)? It was here that the "wanderers and settlers" had to structure space, not only literally, but also through their imaginations, which were at work both when they were awake and when they were asleep:

Human particles were torn from their ground earlier and on a larger scale in America than anywhere else, and this made America the unintentional precursor of modern life. This was to be generalized due to the late arrival of the industrial revolution in many countries, as well as to their wars and political upheavals. This land of exile became almost a paradigm of all exile, and especially of the exile from a mental space made hierarchic by the Throne of God (Miłosz 1982: 208).

It was in this training field that the poet lived through a time when "settling down in exile (...) ceased to be a special case," a departure from the norm; the constant attempt "to feel at home" in every possible way resembled the fate of millions of newcomers who lived in America, receiving "new eyes, new thought, new distance" (Miłosz 1982: 62 and 205; 2001c : 14). Despite the fact that Miłosz, by his own testimony, carried "many cities and countries" in his mind, America's specific, exile-based multiculturalism, accustomed him to relying on the "here and now," and all the internalized countries, as he wrote, stood "in relation to the one which surrounds me every day" (Miłosz 1982: 6 and 2001c: 27–30).

America would not be America, however, and Miłosz would not be Miłosz, if there did not immediately appear a counterweight to this characteristic hospitality of the New World. The hospitality was problematised by the inhabitants' characteristic disrupted perception of time, the disappearance of their awareness of history, their weak memory, and fragile bonds

with others, all of which were partly a result of the empty spaces and internal emptiness, derived from an insufficiency of detail, replaced by prefabricated elements, an “ontological anemia,” which manifested itself in the inward pull of nothingness (Miłosz 2000: 39). Just as the image of America was marked by an internal division, Miłosz's identity had a special duality, which he himself expressed most poignantly:

Imagination, always spatial, points north, south, east, and west of some central, privileged place, which is probably a village from one's childhood or native region. As long as a writer lives in his country, the privileged place, by centrifugally enlarging itself, becomes more or less identified with his country as a whole. Exile displaces that center or rather creates two centers. Imagination relates everything in one's surroundings to “over there” – in my case, somewhere on the European continent. It even continues to designate the four cardinal points, as if I still stood there. At the same time the north, south, east, and west are determined by the place in which I write these words.

Imagination tending toward the distant region of one's childhood is typical of literature of nostalgia (a distance in space often serves as a disguise for a Proustian distance in time). Although quite common, literature of nostalgia is only one among many modes of coping with estrangement from one's native land. The new point which orients space in respect to itself cannot be eliminated, i.e., one cannot abstract from one's physical presence in a definite spot on the Earth. That is why a curious phenomenon appears: the two centers and the two spaces arranged around them interfere with each other or – and this is a happy solution – coalesce (Miłosz 2001c: 16–17).

The two spaces correspond to two circles of readers who are intimately familiar with Miłosz's subjective cartography, and who are situated both there and here. Each reader draws his own map of experiences – delineated both by the sense of emptiness and alienation, of being thrown into an unknown space, and by the need to confront a foreign model, and to relinquish the hegemony of a single place, from the “orthodoxy of thought too comfortably settled” (Rybicka 2011: 37). Miłosz's two centres make it possible for his Polish and Central European readers, and also for his American readers, to situate themselves in this space. We have seen this time and again in 2011.

**trans. Agnieszka Marczyk and Tomasz Bilczewski**

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