

Article

Czesław Miłosz's Translations as "Re-Visioning" of the Psalms: Poetry and Eschatology

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Abstract: This article focuses on Czesław Miłosz's translations of parts of the Psalms and their influence on his poetry. For Miłosz, poetry had an eschatological dimension, a view deeply influenced by his distant cousin, the Lithuanian poet and playwright Oscar Miłosz. In his essay "A Few Words on Poetry," Oscar Miłosz claimed that since prehistoric times, poetry has always followed the mysterious movements of the great soul of the people. He criticized his contemporaries—the French Symbolists—for their elitism, which perpetuated the schism between the poet and the great human family. He predicted that the new poetry would be that of the Bible: "a spacious prose hammered into verses." For him, a truly inspired poet of the future will be able to transcend his paltry ego. Czesław Miłosz—thanks to this significant influence—resisted literary fashions. Moreover, in times of despair or dry spells in his writing, Miłosz would turn to translating the Bible. In his poem "Ars Poetica?" he writes: "I have always aspired to a more spacious form / that would be free from the claims of poetry or prose/and would let us understand each other without exposing / the author or reader to sublime agonies."

Keywords: Czesław Miłosz; Oscar Miłosz; translation of the psalms into Polish; exile; second space; eschatology

1. Introduction: Why Should Poets Study Latin and Greek? Why Should They Turn to Hebrew?

I begin with a personal anecdote that helps to place Czesław Miłosz's attachment to biblical translation in an "existential" frame, as it were. When I graduated from high school, I visited my mother in New York City. Like many Poles affected by Communism and associated economic crises in Poland, she went to the U.S. to work. There were no prospects for young people in Poland then and parents often sacrificed their own well-being and happiness to provide for their offspring. I had been fascinated by Miłosz's poetry since high school, and I even won a national contest in Poland for high-school students, based on my study of Miłosz's magnum opus. My mother wanted me to stay in the U.S. and complete my undergraduate degree there. I wrote a letter to Miłosz, asking for his advice. He was teaching at the University of California, Berkeley then, after escaping the communist regime in Poland. To my surprise, he wrote back swiftly, advising that if I loved literature, I should go back to Poland and study Latin or Greek or Polish at Jagiellonian University. In the U.S., as he put it, critical works and secondary sources supersede the primary texts. One does not read literature there, as he put it, but studies through cultural lenses or reads about literature by focusing on secondary sources. Following both his advice and my heart, I did go back to Poland to study English and Polish literature at Jagiellonian University. However, I never followed his advice about studying Greek and Latin. I found it exaggerated and even hilarious. I only understood later why he valued these ancient languages so highly. One of the explanations is conveyed in his poem "Readings," written in 1969, soon after he started studying Hebrew.

You asked me what is the good of reading the Gospels in Greek.

I answer that it is proper that we move our finger



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Along letters more enduring than those carved in stone,
 And that, slowly pronouncing each syllable,
 We discover the true dignity of speech.
 Compelled to be attentive we shall think of that epoch
 No more distant than yesterday, though the heads of Caesars
 On coins are different today. Yet it is still the same eon.
 Fear and desire are the same, oil and wine
 And bread mean the same. So does the fickleness of the throng
 Avid for miracles as in the past. Even mores,
 Wedding festivities, drugs, laments for the dead
 Only seem to differ.
 [...]
 But the Gospel parable remains in force:
 [...]
 And thus on every page a persistent reader
 Sees twenty centuries as twenty days
 In a world which one day will come to its end.
 [Berkeley, 1969]

(C. Miłosz 1988a, p. 234)

Soon after writing this poem, Miłosz taught himself Hebrew so he could translate part of the Old Testament (OT) into his native Polish. In his translation of psalms from Hebrew to Polish, Miłosz wanted to measure up to the medieval *Psalterz Puławski* translated by anonymous monks in medieval Poland. Miłosz recognized that Latin was not enough to understand the Psalms. One had to read them in Hebrew. What helped Miłosz, as he writes in his introduction to his Psalms in Polish, was finding the bilingual Polish–Hebrew version of the OT translated by Cylkov and printed in 1883 in Warsaw (C. Miłosz 1982, p. 46). To understand the Psalms grammatically, Miłosz studied Benjamin Davidson’s *The Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon*.

2. Oscar Miłosz’s Influence on Czesław Miłosz: What Do Greek, Hebrew, and a Return to the Bible Have to Do with *apokatastasis*?

Miłosz’s turn toward Hebrew happened in the 1970s, a period in his life particularly marked by personal suffering. His wife became degeneratively ill, and his son suffered from a bout of acute mental affliction. In her essay, “Czesław Miłosz’s Theological Two-Step,” Cynthia L. Haven writes:

Perhaps it is not a coincidence that at that time too, beginning in the 1970s, he began also to discuss what he called “second space.” For he found there was another exile, deeper and more enduring perhaps than his geographic one. He decried the banished metaphysical dimension that had disappeared in Western life, leaving us with a shriveled faculty of imagination, a vision that could not see beyond the little “here” and the little “now”. (Haven 2022)

The desire for “second space” was reinforced by his deep studies of his distant cousin Oscar Miłosz, as well as the writings of William Blake. Oscar Miłosz, a Lithuanian poet living in 19th century France and influenced by the same Swedish visionary, Emanuel Swedenborg, who influenced William Blake almost a century earlier, adopted Swedenborg’s model of three-fold time: the time of innocence, the time of the fall, and the time of innocence restored. Later Blake called this act of restoration *apokatastasis*. As Cynthia Haven notices in her essay, Miłosz elaborated on the notion of *apokatastasis* in his poem, “Bells in Winter”. There, he cites the Acts of the Apostles 3:21: “Whom the heaven must

receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began" (Haven 2022). The "restitution" Miłosz quotes in his poem was an analogue of Blake's *apokatastasis*, a Greek word that signified a purification of history, the restoration of the state of innocence prior to original sin.

Oscar Miłosz influenced the young Miłosz more than any Miłosz reader or critic has ever cared to admit, except for one famous Polish critic, Prof. Aleksander Fiut¹. A Lithuanian hermit and eccentric who attempted suicide more than once but died later in life because he tripped while feeding his favorite canary, Oscar Miłosz propagated millenarianism. In other words, he believed in the advent of a new epoch. In his Norton lectures entitled "The Witness of Poetry," Czesław Miłosz writes: "I have never concealed that my acquaintance with his [Oscar Miłosz's] writing when I was a young man, as well as our personal contact, to a large extent determined my own ways as a poet, inclining me to resist literary fashions" (O. Miłosz 1983, pp. 24–25). In one of these lectures, Miłosz analyzes Oscar Miłosz's 1930–37 work, "A Few Words on Poetry," published posthumously. In this work Oscar Miłosz calls poetry "a companion of man since his beginning" and "an organizer of the archetypes" (O. Miłosz 1983, p. 25). He claims that since prehistoric times, "poetry has always followed, fully aware of its terrible responsibilities, the mysterious movements of the great soul of the people" (O. Miłosz 1983, p. 25). It's important to keep in mind that Oscar Miłosz was a contemporary of Oscar Wilde and the French Symbolists, whom he very much criticized for their elitism and belief in pure poetry, such as ineffable combinations of sounds regardless of their meaning. Pure poetry removed religion, philosophy, science, and politics from its domain. By focusing too much on the subconscious and individualism, the Symbolists perpetuated the schism between the poet and the great human family, as Miłosz suggests in his lecture. Czesław's French cousin called for universalizing personal experiences. For Oscar Miłosz, a poet of the future will transcend his paltry ego. In his aforementioned work "A Few Words on Poetry," Oscar Miłosz predicts: "The form of the new poetry will be, in all probability, that of the Bible: a spacious prose hammered into verses" (O. Miłosz 1983, pp. 33–34).

3. How Did Oscar Miłosz's Views Permeate the Future Nobel Laureate's Work?

In his "Ars Poetica?" written in 1968 at Berkeley, Czesław Miłosz opens with the following stanza:

I have always aspired to a more spacious form that would be free from the claims of poetry or prose and would let us understand each other without exposing the author or reader to sublime agonies. (C. Miłosz 1988a, p. 211)

In the poem, Miłosz adopts Oscar's phrase "spacious form," which lets us believe he does not just mean poetry free of restrictive conventions. Miłosz goes on, envisioning here "the second space" of poetry: its mysterious origin. A poet does not know the lines existed in him. The poem jumps out of him or her, like a tiger. In the third stanza of the poem, Miłosz says:

That's why poetry is rightly said to be dictated by a daimonion, though it's an exaggeration to maintain that he must be an angel. It's hard to guess where that pride of poets comes from. (ibid.)

With his emphasis on the "second space," Czesław not only illuminates poetry's unseen forces; he calls us toward the ethical examination of these forces. Because we do not know the provenance of our inspirations, we should not rush into publishing poems; we should write them reluctantly, having gained first the awareness of our responsibilities to others. Poets should hope that only good spirits chose them as an instrument. Hence, poetry should not be a self-gratifying act of exhibitionism, but rather a deeply thought-out ethical expression of communal witness.

Miłosz also argued that one line of poetry weighed more than a hundred pages of laborious prose. In other words, poems are substantive. A poet is a witness who can save nations. In his famous 1950 anti-Soviet poem "Who You Have Wronged," Miłosz addresses every Soviet political oppressor or political spy as a national traitor:

Do not feel safe. The poet remembers.
 You can kill one, but another is born.
 The words are written down, the deed, the date.
 And you'd have done better with a winter dawn,
 A rope, and a branch bowed beneath your weight.² (C. Miłosz 1988a, p. 106)

Miłosz's underground poem ("Who You Have Wronged" was not included in school anthologies; it was censored and banned) became so renowned in Poland that as high school students, we recited it by heart. This poem, one could claim, did contribute to saving the Polish nation. This poem was a mighty soldier, an integral part of the Solidarity Movement. It was practically an alternative national hymn of resistance.

Moving back to Czesław Miłosz's younger years, as a student he was already so inspired by his Lithuanian/French cousin that in 1931 he founded, with his fellow poets, a literary group—*Żagary*—during his law studies at Vilnius University in Lithuania. The group's artistic credo was that of catastrophism but also hope. In his lecture "Poets and the Human Family," Miłosz explains:

The principle of hope is also operative whenever people foresee a cataclysm that will put an end to an established order so that a new, purified reality can appear—purified by a revolution, by a flood, or "conflagration universelle". (C. Miłosz 1983, p. 36).

Just like his cousin Oscar Miłosz, the Nobel Prize laureate was a proponent of eschatological poetry. In the conclusion to his Norton lecture "Poets and the Human Family," Miłosz poses a question: "Is noneschatological poetry possible? That would be a poetry indifferent to the existence of the Past-Future axis and to the 'last things'— Salvation and Damnation, Judgement, the Kingdom of God, the goal of History—in other words, to everything that connects the time assigned to human life with the time of all humanity" (C. Miłosz 1983, p. 37). Continuing, Miłosz poses yet another crucial question without a question mark: "Is it possible that the gloom of twentieth-century poetry can be explained by the pattern that resulted from the 'schism and misunderstanding between the poet and the human family'?" He answers with his diagnosis: "This goes against the grain of our civilization, shaped as it is by the Bible and, for that reason, eschatological to the core" (C. Miłosz 1983, p. 37).

It is safe to conclude that this insistence on the eschatological dimension of poetry is an inheritance from the influence of Oscar Miłosz. In his article "Mistrz i Czeladnik" [A Master and an Apprentice], as part of his book "W Stronę Miłosza" [Towards Miłosz], Aleksander Fiut points to similarities and differences in Czesław Miłosz and his cousin Oscar Miłosz's writing. One of the similarities he notices is that the Polish poet also conveys in his works a dilemma of compassion and pride towards those who live thoughtlessly, and only instinctively (Fiut 2003, pp. 121–22). Czesław Miłosz claims that our human condition is corrupted and needs liberation, hence his fascination with the concept of *apokatastasis* and eschatology. This, in turn, sets the stage for his continual exploration of the question: unde malum? Poetry poses questions, whereas religion provides answers.

4. Translation of the Bible and the Meaning of Exile: Lessons in "the Second Space"

In her book, *Literatura Jako Ćwiczenie Duchowe* [Literature as Spiritual Exercise], Karina Jarzyńska claims that Miłosz treated his translation of the Bible as a cleansing ritual, more effective than any contemporary poem or fiction (Jarzyńska 2018, p. 17). As Jarzyńska points out, it was Miłosz's tribute to the Polish language from the vantage point of an exile. It seems important to add that Miłosz considered himself an internal exile as well. Miłosz was an exile in several senses: the historical sense, the Greek etymological sense, and the biblical sense. Historical exile is, in Edward Said's definition, "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home [. . .]" (Said 2000, p. 173). The Greek meaning of exile, as Ruth Padel, a British poet, reminds us in her book *The Mara Crossing*, goes back to the origin of the Greek word *xeniteia*, a spiritual

detachment practiced by the monks of antiquity as the choice of the desert to restore the soul or converse with Mystery. This meaning, as Padel reminds us, is congruent with a Christian understanding of human existence, to bring to mind a fragment from Genesis 12.1 in the King James translation: “Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will shew thee” (Padel 2012, p. 153).

Miłosz, in his essay on exile, expressed something similar to Ruth Padel’s understanding:

Writing this I am visited by a tune of an old religious song in Polish which begins: “Exiles of Eve, we beseech Thy help”. And indeed, an archetypal exclusion from the Garden of Eden repeats itself in our lives, whether Eden be the womb of our mother or the enchanting garden of our early childhood. Centuries of tradition are behind the image of the whole earth as a land of exile, usually presented as a deserts, sterile landscape in which Adam and Eve march, their heads despondently lowered. They were chased from their native realm, their true home where the same rhythm has ruled over their bodies and their surroundings, where no separation and no nostalgia has been known. Looking back, they may see fiery swords guarding the Gates of Paradise. Their nostalgic thinking about a return to the once happy existence is intensified by their awareness of prohibition. And yet they will never completely relinquish the thought of the day when their exile will end. Later, much later on, perhaps that dream will take the shape of a golden city lasting beyond time, of a heavenly Jerusalem. (C. Miłosz 1988b, p. 2)

Miłosz’s claim that exile is a human condition known to all does not diminish the existence of geographical and political exile. Even though each exile is unique, Miłosz points to some patterns in exile and also to its Greek origin. Miłosz writes:

In every one of these examples, and they can be multiplied, a pattern is noticeable. A farewell to one’s country, to its landscapes, customs and mores throws one into a no man’s land comparable perhaps to the desert chosen as a place of contemplation by early Christian hermits. Then the only remedy against the loss of orientation is to create anew one’s own North, East, West, and South and posit in that new space a Witebsk or a Dublin elevated to the second power. What has been lost is recuperated on a higher level of vividness and presence. (Ibid. p. 3)

Here we return to the idea of restoration, recuperation, *apokatastasis*, or what Miłosz called “a second space”. Through desert and renunciation, we grow closer to Mystery and achieve “a higher level of vividness and presence,” as Miłosz puts it in the above passage.

In connection with the origin of the Greek word *xeniteia*, Miłosz continues: “Perhaps a loss of harmony with the surrounding space, the inability to feel at home in the world, so oppressing to an expatriate, a refugee, an immigrant, however we call him, paradoxically integrates him in contemporary society and makes him, if he is an artist, understood by all. Even more, to express the existential situation of modern man, one must live in exile of some sort” (ibid. p. 2).

Theodore Adorno says something similar in his autobiography *Minima Moralia*, written in exile: “it is part of morality not to be at home in one’s home” (Adorno 2005, p. 39). Adorno warned against complicity with commodity culture. To refuse this mainstream mentality—life as commodity—is exile’s intellectual mission. Each intellectual, or artist, should in fact choose exile, Adorno proposed. Adorno claimed that our only hope was in writing. As I pointed out in section three above, Miłosz, similarly to Adorno, critiqued thoughtless, blunt, animal-like living in his contemporaries. He also admonished himself in his poems for living instinctively and not serving a greater Mystery. In his poem “Not This Way,” written in Berkeley in 1972, Miłosz writes:

Forgive me. I was a schemer like many of those who steal by human habitations at night.

[...]

Knowing more, I pretended that less would suffice, unlike those who give testimony.

[...]

My voice always lacked fullness, I would like to render a different thanksgiving, And generously, without irony which is the glory of slaves. (C. Miłosz 1988a, p. 246)

In another of his poems, "So Little," Miłosz also conveys contrition for settling for less by succumbing to the instinctual joys of this life and being complicit with commodity culture:

I said so little.

Days were short.

[...]

The jaws of Leviathan

Were closing upon me.

Naked, I lay on the shores

Of desert islands.

The white whale of this world

Hauled me down to its pit. (C. Miłosz 1988a, p. 247)

In yet another poem, "Account," written in 1980 in Berkeley, Miłosz admits repentantly:

The history of my stupidity would fill many volumes.

Some would be devoted to acting against consciousness,

Like the flight of a moth which, had it known,

Would have tended nevertheless toward the candle's flame.

Others would deal with ways to silence anxiety,

The little whisper which, though it is a warning, is ignored. (ibid. p. 384)

This thread of remorse and repentance for being too complicit in life is a leitmotif in Miłosz's poetry, and it perhaps explains his continual conversions toward "second space," and the desire for more cultural resistance and *apokatastasis*.

5. Contemporary Language as an Exile and Translation of the Bible as an Act of Cultural Resistance and *apokatastasis*

Miłosz was driven to study Hebrew and translate part of the Old Testament into Polish not only for spiritual reasons, as a soul in exile, but also out of a need to create a new cultural orientation amidst the cultural nihilism he experienced in Stalinist newspeak and the nihilistic California culture he encountered during his time teaching at Berkeley. I agree with Monika Kaczorowska who writes in her article, "Czesława Miłosza Koncepcja Przekładu Tekstów Biblijnych. Rekonstrukcja,"³: "For Miłosz, poetry was a remedy for contemporary nihilism and the cruelty of life. It led to the spiritual restoration of the readers" (Kaczorowska 2011, p. 350).⁴ We can add to Kaczorowska's claim that especially while at Berkeley, Miłosz complained about the culture of nihilism. He would quote to his students' graffiti found in one of the Berkeley bathrooms:

God is Dead.

Nietzsche

Nietzsche is dead.

God

Miłosz's attention to college student jokes about nihilism comes out of a serious interest in the relation of human speech to the biblical word. Miłosz believed that studying ancient languages and biblical texts was an antidote for nihilism. So was his hope for contemporary poetry.

In his essay “O Biblijnych przekładach Czesława Miłosza,”⁵ Jacek Salij OP, a Polish theologian and Thomist, as well as a Dominican friar, writes that, for Miłosz, the New Testament was an archetype of human speech. It also appears to be what we might call an archetype of poetic diction. What Salij means, in other words, is that Miłosz, inspired by biblical language, aspired to a more dignified diction devoid of irony and cynicism, or unnecessary fireworks of language. I would also add that in his aspiration to eschatology and second space, we see Oscar Miłosz’s influence via his desire to bring poetry closer to religion. This phrase, “archetype of poetic diction,” is reminiscent of Oscar Miłosz’s understanding of poetry as “an organizer of the archetypes”. Czesław Miłosz believed that the Bible provided a type of speech that seemed permanent as opposed to fashionable or fleeting. The evangelical texts in a pure way expressed the truth about the human condition (Salij 1981, pp. 77–78).

To follow Salij’s suggestion, Miłosz’s most significant purpose in making these translations was to reclaim the poetic and dignified speech of the Psalms and get away from the contemporary jargon of the intelligentsia and the journalists that was increasingly used in contemporary translations of the Bible into Polish. The great Polish poet considered the contemporary Polish language an impoverished refugee from the Communist dictatorship, but also from contemporary journalistic newspeak. In his introduction to his translations, Miłosz writes that he looked to biblical language as the measure and template for contemporary poetic diction. Imitating the medieval *Psalterz Puławski*, Miłosz decided to keep each verse as a rhythmical whole (as opposed to the free verse used in newer translations). He would mark pauses with asterisks.

His translation was not mimetic but creative. In that way, Miłosz was expressing the need for a spiritual revival of the Polish language against the cliché, newspeak, and journalistic jargon. A similar mission was proclaimed by Adam Zagajewski and other poets of the New Wave movement in 1968—the need for cleansing the speech of doublespeak, of communistic propaganda-related lies. Similarly, Miłosz yearned for language’s return from banishment to the original womb: the biblical diction and its spacious form.

Work on these translations served as Miłosz’s personal *ars poetica* and a mission to renew his personal poetic diction, to find the right word—a poetic obsession of Miłosz, as the word was always insufficient in expressing the ineffable and fleeting experience of beauty and harmony. In his prose poem “Esse,” translated into English by Robert Pinski, Miłosz writes: “And so it befell me that after so many attempts at naming the world, I am able only to repeat, harping on one string, the highest, the unique avowal beyond which no power can attain: *I am, she is*” (C. Miłosz 1988a, p. 221). In the moment of astonishment, words fail. We are “a sponge, suffering because it cannot saturate itself; a river, suffering because reflections of clouds and trees are not clouds and trees” (ibid.). In his Polish introduction to *Księga Psalmów* [The Book of Psalms], Miłosz writes:

Since my youth I have always searched in the Biblical language for an ideal and a measure for poetry. My own writing and the current work of translating the psalms is the same work. This work should remain invisible to readers; hidden in the craft, and resulting in simplicity and conciseness. (C. Miłosz 1982, p. 52)

6. Psalm 131 in Miłosz’s Translation into Polish

As I stated above, Miłosz emphasized in his translations not so much faithfulness to the original meaning but the sound of the translation itself, rhythm, and diction. Restoring biblical language to Polish was a crucial mission. In his drafts of the translation, as Monika Kaczorowska has pointed out, we rarely see any notes referring to the original Hebrew. More often, Miłosz writes notes about existing Polish translations of the Psalms. We can see how Miłosz favors sound, rhythm, and diction over overt faithfulness to the original by analyzing one of his translations. Since Psalm 131 is a favorite of mine, and it also happens to be representative of Miłosz’s translation method, it will serve as our example for comparative analysis.

In Robert Alter’s recent translation from Hebrew, we read

Lord, my heart has not been haughty,
 nor have my eyes looked too high,
 nor have I striven for great things,
 nor for things too wondrous for me.
 But I have calmed and contented myself
 like a weaned babe on its mother—
 like a weaned babe I am with myself.
 Wait, O Israel, for the Lord,
 now and forevermore. (Alter 2007, pp. 457–58)

Psalm 131 belongs to the Psalms of Ascent, which the Levites would sing as they were ascending the steps to the Temple. This particular psalm seems to be particularly personal. The central image is of a weaned baby. In his translation notes, Alter comments, “the person content with his lot, who does not aspire to grand things, is able to give himself the kind of reassuring calm that a loving mother gives the weaned child whom she comforts” (Alter 2007, p. 458). If we look at the Hebrew, it says literally, according to Alter: “like a weaned babe I am on myself”. Because our soul is like a weaned baby it lies within us contented, quiet, unassuming, not anxious and proud, and this is how a trusting Israelite should wait for God.

Czesław Miłosz’s translation of the psalm, translated into English line by line, looks like this:

Panie, serce moje nie było harde * i nie wywyższały się oczy moje, *
Lord, my heart was not haughty and my eyes were not proud
 i nie goniłem za rzeczami zbyt wielkimi * i zbyt cudownymi dla mnie.
and I did not chase after things too great and too wondrous for me.
 Czyż nie uspokajałem i nie uciszałem duszy mojej * Jak niemowlęcia przy matce?
 * Jak niemowlę jest we mnie dusza moja
Did I not calm and quiet my heart? Like an infant which is with its mother?
Like an infant my soul is in me.
 Pokładaj w Panu nadzieję, Izraelu. * teraz i na wieki.
Trust in the Lord, Israel, now and forever. (C. Miłosz 1982, p. 292)

Why does Miłosz start with the past tense? In Hebrew, the tense is present perfect. Instead of saying: “Oh Lord, My heart is not too haughty,” Miłosz’s translation into Polish reads more like a summing up of his life: “Oh Lord, my heart was not too haughty”. In other words, the speaker in Miłosz’s translation says: Oh Lord, I have been good. I have done everything well. Instead, by preserving the present tense or present perfect (as in Alter’s translation), the speaker implores God to help him with his pride. Our heart is too proud and that’s why we use a speech act, an intentional phrase: “O Lord, my heart is not too proud” (meaning: “Come to my aid with my pride now, because I am sinful; my heart is too proud, but in that moment of prayer my heart is going to convert to humility”). To reiterate, the use of the present tense suggests one who has been sinful and is asking God for grace. The use of the past tense, however, suggests a different voice entirely—the voice of a man who deserves blessing because he has not been proud.

What is even more puzzling and perhaps concerning in Miłosz’s translation, as opposed to the original and Alter’s faithful translation, is that Miłosz does not preserve the central image of a weaned baby and instead uses the more general image of an infant up to a year old that does not yet speak (in Polish: “niemowlę”). What is fascinating in the original is the sense of measure. The word “weaning” in Hebrew also means “as I deserve” (implicitly: receiving your due), one’s measure. So why would Miłosz forgo the central image? Let’s look at the existing Polish translations for a change that Miłosz studied in preparation for his own. Here I will provide English substitutes after each line in Polish.

Let us start with the translation by Jakub Wujek (1541—27 April 1597) from Greek to 16th-century Polish.⁶

Wujek

PSALM CXXX.⁷

U Żydów 131.

Nauka pobożnemu, pokorę zachować, a tu się Panu przypodobać, przykładem Dawida.

The lesson for a pious man to remain humble, in order to please God, following David's example.

1 Pieśń stopniów Dawidowa.

Panie! nie wyniosło się serce moje: ani się wywyższyły oczy moje: ani chodziłem w rzeczach wielkich, ani w dziwnych nad mię.

Lord, my heart has not aimed too high: nor have my eyes reached too high: nor have I dressed in things too great, nor too strange for me.

2 Jeżeli nie pokornie rozumiał, alem wywyższał duszę moją: jako dzieciątko ostawione u matki swojej, tak odpłata na duszy mojej.

If I have understood things too proudly and my soul acted too haughty: like a weaned baby with its mother; that's the payment for my soul.

3 Niechajże Izrael nadzieję ma w Panu odtąd aż na wieki.

Let Israel put its hope in the Lord now and forever. (Jakuba and Wujka 1962, p. 748)

Wujek begins with the past tense but then reverts to the present tense in lines two and three, as if he wanted to comprise both. Note that Polish does not have a present perfect tense, so Wujek is creating his own present perfect by linking the past to the present. What's impressive in his translation is the maintenance of the central image of a weaned child as well as the original Hebrew meaning of receiving the exact measure deserved. Wujek's persona says: "In general, I have not been too proud, but if I have even been proud in the past, now my soul rests like a weaned child with its mother."

Let's look next at a Polish medieval version (in anonymous translation) of Psalm 131 in *Psalterz Pułtawski*,⁸ which Miłosz admired so much for the beauty of its language.

Psalm 131⁹

Domine, non est ex altatum. Pienie wschodow. Głos cerekwie o naśladowaniu pokorności. Dawid.

1. Gospodnie, nie jest powyszono sierce moje ani wznieślesta się oczy moje,

Oh Lord, my heart is not haughty and my eyes do not look too high,

2. ani chodziłem w wielkich ani w dziwiech nad mię.

Nor did I carry things too lofty, nor too strange for me.

3. Acz nieśmiernie jeśm rozumiał, ale powyszał jeśm duszę moją,

I calmed and contented my soul

4. jako oddojony nad macierzą swoją, ta<ko> odpłata w duszy mojej.

Like a weaned child with its mother, such is the payment for my soul.

5. Pwaj Israhel w Gospodna od ninie aż na wieki.

Rest, Israel, in the Host, from now until forever (Psalterz Pułtawski n.d.)

For our reference and clarity, the new American Standard Bible translation of this psalm reads:

A Song of Ascents, of David. O LORD, my heart is not proud, nor my eyes haughty; Nor do I involve myself in great matters, Or in things too difficult for me.

Surely I have composed and quieted my soul; Like a weaned child rests against his mother, My soul is like a weaned child within me. ([American Standard Bible n.d.](#))

The King James Bible reads:

LORD, my heart is not haughty, nor mine eyes lofty: neither do I exercise myself in great matters, or in things too high for me.

Surely I have behaved and quieted myself, as a child that is weaned of his mother: my soul is even as a weaned child.¹⁰

It is fascinating to realize that Miłosz was exposed to the original image of the weaned babe and also read translations that used the present tense, and yet he chose different options. My belief is that for Miłosz, sound and concision were more important than being faithful to the original. Miłosz, first of all, wanted a very good poem to come out of his translation. Instead of choosing two words, “weaned babe,” he went for one word, which sounds magnificent in Polish: “niemowlę” (an infant up to a year old that does not yet speak). There is more to his choice, however. The Polish word “niemowlę” originates from “nie mowa” (no speech) and it comes closest to the English word infant (from Latin *infans*, meaning “unable to speak” or “speechless”). The word “niemowlę” brings to mind the paradoxical topos of *Verbum infans*. An oxymoron meaning “the unspeaking word,” it alludes to Christ who incarnated the word in the world as an infant.

Whether our heart was proud and is no longer proud, or, whether it has always been proud, becomes somewhat insignificant perhaps, when we consider that through Miłosz’s translation choices, the greatness of this psalm lies in the metaphor that our soul’s utter dependence on God is like that of a speechless infant. That is perhaps what Miłosz intended to convey. A “weaned baby” emphasizes less attachment to its mother than the more general and open-ended term “infant”. The weaned baby has learned to eat independently of the mother. Even though “niemowlę” can be “a weaned baby,” the etymological focus here is on the lack of speech, on silence. Silence in the presence of the Lord denotes awe and humility, as well as trust, peacefulness, and a heart-to-heart relationship. Through practice, the person loses the need for prideful behaviors, silencing his “flattering lips” or “boastful tongue” (Psalm 12)—and can even move beyond being dependent on God as the source of humility. In other words, they stand with God heart-to-heart without the need for God to feed them their self-control.

Miłosz’s rendering of Psalm 131 proves that translation does not exist; there are only translations. I would even claim his translation is masterful, because it does not preserve all the meaning of the original as faithfully as it might. Miłosz chose to co-write the Psalm. In other words, instead of recreating the Psalm, he cocreated it. He revisioned it.

7. The Fruit of Translation

How does biblical influence manifest in Miłosz’s poetry written after his translations of Psalms? How does the dignified diction of a psalmist’s voice transpire in his own poetry? Here are just a few examples.

In his poem, “One More Contradiction” from his collection *Facing the River*, Miłosz reenacts the voice of a Psalmist-like penitent, but with clarity and vision that I believe was—at least—partially an outcome of his communing with biblical visions:

Did I fulfill what I had to, here, on earth?
 I was a guest in a house under white clouds
 Where rivers flow and grasses renew themselves.
 So what if I were called, if I was hardly aware.
 The next time early I would search for wisdom
 I would not pretend I could be just like others:
 Only evil and suffering come from that.
 Renouncing, I would choose the fate of obedience.

I would suppress my wolf's eye and greedy throat. (C. Miłosz 1995, p. 31)

Here, we encounter the mature voice of a poet, an exile, and a pilgrim who is aware of his vocation and responsibilities on this earth; the voice that regrets every time it imitated slavishly the voice of others and settled for less. The inner voice of conscience fuses with the external voice; they become one. It's the voice that equates freedom with obedience and renunciation.

In his poem, "Realism," written at Berkeley in 1993, also from the same collection, *Facing the River*, Miłosz makes perhaps direct reference to Psalm 9 and Psalm 97:

Rejoice! Give thanks! I raised my voice
To join them in their choral singing,
Amid their ruffles, collets, and silk skirts,
One of them already, who vanished long ago.
And our song soared up like smoke from a censer. (Ibid, p. 30)

Another psalm-like poem, "Meditation," written in 1990 and included in his collection, *A New Province*, could be read as an allusion to Psalm 131:

Lord, my heart is full of admiration, and I want to talk with you
For you understand me, in spite of my contradictions.
[...]
What can I do more, Lord, than to meditate on all that
And stand before you in the attitude of the implorer. (C. Miłosz 1996, p. 382)

In Miłosz's psalm-like poem, there is an interesting transition from a desire to speak with God as an equal to silent meditation yielding an urgent plea. Miłosz transitions from the tone of a man who deserves blessing to a tone of humbler praise through the recognition that the protagonist of this world is an implorer, a beggar. Just like in Miłosz's "re-visioning" of Psalm 131, this poem also ends on a note of silence via a meditative imploration.

Finally in his collection, *To [This]*, published originally in Kraków, Poland in 2000, Miłosz's poem "Modlitwa" [Prayer] becomes an act of penitence and confession:

Approaching ninety, and still with a hope
That I could tell it, say it, blurt it out.
If not before people, at least before You,
Who nourished me with honey and wormwood
I am ashamed, for I must believe you protected me,
As if I had for You some particular merit.
I was like those in the gulags who fashioned a cross from twigs
And prayed to it at night in the barracks.
I made a plea and You deigned to answer it,
So that I could see how unreasonable it was.
But when out of pity for others I begged a miracle,
The sky and the earth were silent, as always.
[...]
Liberate me from guilt, real and imagined.
Give me certainty that I toiled for Your glory.
In the hour of the agony of death, help me with Your suffering
Which cannot save the world from pain. (C. Miłosz 2001, pp. 66–67)

It is not a coincidence that his last collection is entitled *The Second Space*, the term he was fascinated with in the 1970s, precisely when he started to learn Hebrew to translate

parts of the Old Testament. In this collection Miłosz mourns the fact that our civilization has lost the second space, the space of Heaven and Hell, good vs. evil, the sense of eschatology. In his opening poem, Miłosz asks:

Have we really lost faith in that other space?
 Have they vanished forever, both Heaven and Hell?
 [...]
 Let us implore that it be returned to us,
 That second space. (C. Miłosz 2005, p. 3)

The second space in Miłosz's cosmogony is intertwined with inner exile. One has to renounce this life, often possible through accepting suffering, in order to glimpse the "second space". Here again, we hear a word: "imploration". The poem transitions from a question to a prayer. We cannot obtain "second space" on our own; it is received through grace, hence we need to implore "that it be returned to us". The choice of a passive voice indicates that we are the recipients of grace as an outcome of imploration. Once again, humility is a pre-requisite for grace, just as in Psalm 131. When we silence our hearts and stand in awe and imploration, we gain access to "that other space".

It is also important to note that one of the four parts of the collection is about the life of his distant cousin, Oscar Miłosz, an inner exile. In this collection, published in 2002, two years before his death, we also hear almost a psalm-like hieratic diction. Particularly in the poem "Wysłuchaj" [Hear Me], in its original version, inverted syntactic structures are reminiscent of the biblical tone. The beauty of this prayer poem lies in its simplicity and conciseness which Miłosz acquired from studying and translating the Psalms. Here, undoubtedly, Miłosz alludes to both Psalms 51 and 59 in his attempt to measure up to the medieval *Psalterz Puławski*.

In Robert Hass's translation, the stylized Polish is not preserved, but the psalm-like tone and diction are distinctive:

HEAR ME
 Hear me, Lord, for I am a sinner, which means I have nothing except prayer.
 Protect me from the day of dryness and impotence.
 When neither a swallow's flight nor peonies, daffodils and irises in the flower
 market are a sign of Your glory.
 When I will be surrounded by scoffers and unable, against their arguments, to
 remember any miracle of Yours.
 When I will seem to myself an imposter and swindler because I take part in
 religious rites.
 When I will accuse You of establishing the universal law of death.
 When I am ready at last to bow down to nothingness and call life on earth a
 devil's vaudeville. (C. Miłosz 2005, p. 24)

Miłosz again speaks in the voice of a beggar, stripped of all layers of ego. His soul is pure, humble, and trusting, like that of the infant in Psalm 131. In this last collection, his poetic "last testament," Miłosz matures fully into a psalmist who continually implores for the return of the "second space" in the voice of a speechless beggar. This brings us back to the poem "Ars Poetica?," with its expressed hope "that only good spirits" choose a poet "as an instrument". Miłosz comes full circle here, demonstrating in his late poems that he fulfilled his responsibility to the larger human family: he became an instrument for Mystery and good spirits.

8. Conclusions

Oscar Miłosz propagated eschatological poetry, and his Polish cousin Czesław Miłosz published a number of eschatological poems, or poems of the second space, in his magnum

opus. Eschatology and the existence of second space are more and more resonant with poets nowadays. In this time of war in Ukraine and ecological crises, we are turning towards the themes of Apocalypse or Heaven and Hell more than ever. We yearn to know “why we have to suffer” and “what’s after death”? Do our lives reach *apokatastasis*? Czesław Miłosz’s question, “What is poetry that does not save/Nations or people?” is more pertinent than ever (C. Miłosz 1988a, p. 78). Another way of posing this question is through Psalm 8: “What is mankind that you are mindful of them,/human beings that you care for them?” Poets care for mankind. “The Poet remembers.” That’s why, as Miłosz proposes in “Ars Poetica?,” we should write carefully, sporadically, and hope we only invite good spirits into our writing. In that sense, Miłosz humbly continued Oscar Miłosz’s heritage of poetry as a responsibility to the larger human family. Poetry, for both, is in relationship with the Infinite and the human family at the same time. Poetry has the power to save or condemn. It has the power of restoration, of *apokatastasis*. An exile can find his or her home there because poetry witnesses the second space and sometimes it even resides in it.

In the end, I wish I had studied Latin, Greek, and Hebrew.

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Notes

¹ In his article “Mistrz i Czeladnik” [A Master and an Apprentice] included in his book “W Stronę Miłosza” [Towards Miłosz], Aleksander Fiut, a Polish critic, literature professor at the Jagiellonian University, as well as the renowned expert on Czesław Miłosz’s magnum opus, admits the huge influence Oscar Miłosz’s writing had on Czesław Miłosz’s work.

² Trans. Richard Lourie.

³ [The Concept of Miłosz’s Biblical Translations. Reconstruction].

⁴ All English translations of critical texts from Polish in this essay are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

⁵ In my translation to English: “On Czesław Miłosz’s Biblical Translations”.

⁶ Wujek was a Polish Jesuit, religious writer, Doctor of Theology, Vice-Chancellor of the Vilnius Academy and translator of the Bible into Polish. He is well-known for his translation of the Bible into Polish: the *Wujek Bible*. (Wujek 1923).

⁷ Pismo Święte Starego i Nowego Testamentu w przekładzie Wujka.

⁸ *Psalterz Puławski* is a handwritten anonymous manuscript from the end of the fifteenth century. It is held in Czartoryski Museum, a historic museum in Kraków, Poland, one of the country’s oldest. The initial collection was formed in 1796 in Puławy by Princess Izabela Czartoryska.

⁹ *Psalterz Pułtawski*.

¹⁰ King James Bible: <https://biblehub.com/kjv/psalms/131.htm> (accessed on 12 September 2022).

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