

“Secure the Bastion of Sensation”: Seamus Heaney’s and Czesław Miłosz’s Poetry of the Everyday¹

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Abstract:

This essay attempts to situate Seamus Heaney’s poetics of the everyday in relation to the work of Czesław Miłosz, who for many years served as one of his sources of inspiration. Although Heaney frequently treated Polish poetry as a lesson in the poet’s ethical responsibility, he also found in it, thanks to translations, a testimony to amazement at seemingly trite objects and trivial phenomena. A comparative analysis of selected poems confronts Miłosz’s and Heaney’s poetry of the everyday with the long tradition of literary epiphanies, paying particular attention to the Romantic and Modernist moments, and to both poets’ turn towards the Dutch masters.

Keywords: Dutch painting, epiphany, poetics of the everyday, Polish-Irish literary relations, translation

1. *Translation: the road not taken*

Today, despite geographical distance, a certain sense of kinship connects Poland and Ireland – realms separated by hundreds of miles of land and sea.

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This kinship does not simply result from the awareness of a characteristic interweaving of public life and religious traditions in both countries, or from their painful history of colonial subjugation. It is also not just an outcome of the intense experience of modernization brought by the last two decades. In the case of the Green Island, this experience transformed the grim image of the forsaken homeland of Joyce's *Dubliners* into a myth of a promised land that attracts thousands of youth. In Poland's case, it changed the image of a country enslaved by totalitarianism into an icon of young democracies and successful political transformations. The special kinship between Poland and Ireland also stems from the cultural contacts that were revitalized in the early 1990s – and in this context, the modern poetry of both countries has played a crucially important role (Jarniewicz 2007; Kay 2012). For it is quite significant that – to use Stanisław Barańczak's words about Seamus Heaney – “despite a language barrier, in the person of Ireland's greatest living poet our poetry has one of its most insightful readers in the West; what's more, it has exerted significant influence over his works” (1994, 18). Barańczak's opinion is directly confirmed by the Irish Nobel Laureate's collection of essays entitled *The Government of the Tongue* (published in the late 80s), where we find penetrating readings of the works of Zbigniew Herbert (“Atlas of Civilization”) and Czesław Miłosz (“The Impact of Translation”) (Heaney 1988)². In his essay on Miłosz, a slightly altered version of an article initially published in the *Yale Review*, Heaney describes his path toward a deeper understanding of the culture that nurtured him and his poetry.

I am reminded of Stephen Dedalus's enigmatic declaration that the shortest way to Tara was via Holyhead, implying that departure from Ireland and an inspection of the country from the outside was the surest way of getting to the core of the Irish experience. I wonder if we might not nowadays affirm, analogously, that the shortest way to Whitby, the monastery where Caedmon sang the first Anglo-Saxon verses, is via Warsaw and Prague. To put it more directly, contemporary English poetry has become aware of the insular and eccentric nature of English experience in all the literal and extended meanings of those adjectives. (Heaney 1986, 8)

For Heaney, the path that took him through the geography of Central Europe to the core of Irishness – as if this core could be revealed more fully only by means of a certain displacement – had both collective and individual components; it was a search for both poetry's place in the community and

² It is worth mentioning that Miłosz was also interested in Heaney's poetry – something that can be gleaned, for example, from his commentary about the poem “In memoriam M.K.H.” included in *A Book of Luminous Things*: “All poetry of Seamus Heaney is rooted in his native Ireland, in his country childhood, country labors, and Catholic rites” (Miłosz 1996, 183).

the ethical sources of Heaney's own writing. This path led him through the experience of translation, but not simply in the elementary, 'philological' sense of this concept, which equates translation with movement between source and target linguistic realms. While remaining outside the bounds of Polish, Heaney treated translations as peculiar questions flowing out from within his own native tradition – questions that are especially valuable because they are, paradoxically, external to this tradition to some extent. They are simultaneously one's own and someone else's.

The language barrier also led to the immersion of Heaney's reading of East Central European literature in that aspect of translation which some theorists refer to as cultural translation (Asad 1986, 141-164; Damrosch 2003, 326-330; Bassnett and Lefevere 1990, 3-13; Staten 2005, 111-126). The Irish poet tried to compensate for that which is ultimately inaccessible – even in the deepest recesses of the English language – by ceaseless exploration of the Central European context, and by attempts to situate this context in relation to the specificity of Irish culture. Precisely this intimate relationship with the context supported, and later illuminated, the richness of meanings that escape interlingual transfer; it also made it possible for Heaney to co-author, along with Stanisław Barańczak, an excellent translation of Jan Kochanowski's *Laments* (1994). This is how he described his contextual explorations in "The Impact of Translation", evoking his encounter with Miłosz's "Incantation" (2003, 239):

It counted for much that this poem was written by somebody who resisted the Nazi occupation of Poland and broke from the ranks of the People's Republic after the war and paid for the principle and pain of all that with a lifetime of exile and self-scrutiny. The poem, in fact, is a bonus accruing to a life lived in the aftermath of right and hurtful decisions. (Heaney 1986, 3)

For Heaney, the experience of poets whose works resisted the intellectual and emotional emptiness of totalitarianism was tantamount to the defence of human dignity. It was the right measure of poetic diction, a specific test of credibility, which, in Western literary circles, had been replaced by "a permissive, centrally heated, grant-aided pluralism of fashions and schools, a highly amplified language of praise which becomes the language of promotion and marketing" (Heaney 1986, 7). He made the most talented self-reflective writers into *ironists and dandies*, casting jealous glances at that otherworld where the risk of writing and creative independence was charged with suffering.

As Heaney saw, the aesthetic sensibility of Central European artists was shaped by trials where the stakes were not the more or less capricious recognition granted by elites but rather their own fate; and it seems that for him this sensibility – by means of translation – restored balance to poetry in the world of "non-defeat and non-invasion since 1066":

[...] there was a road not taken in poetry in English in this century, a road traveled once by the young Auden and the middle-aged Muir. [...] Consequently we are all the more susceptible to translations which arrive like messages from those holding their own much, much farther down that road not taken by us – because, happily, it was a road not open to us. (Heaney 1986, 14)

The authenticity of experience and the credibility of language were thus phenomena which Heaney sought – through the mediation of translation – in both Miłosz’s and Herbert’s volumes of verse. He made these into a pillar of his own program of ethical poetry, which carried the burden of both demanding responsibility and crystalline diction of moral authority. His search was a type of calling out from the depths of modernity for the restoration of the romantic primacy of poetry; it was a distrust of the conveniences of modernization and the lethargy of the postmodern era:

We who live and have our being in English know [...] that our recent history of consumerist freedom and eerie nuclear security seems less authentic to us than the tragically tested lives of those who live beyond the pale of all this fiddle. Which is why the note sounded by translated poetry from that world beyond is so credible, desolating, and resuscitative. (Heaney 1986, 14)

The path of ethical credibility, which Heaney followed in the footsteps of Eastern European poets, did not end with the symbolic and historical fall of the Berlin Wall. But one can easily notice that after 1989, the Irishman’s poetic work became more courageous in taking roads he had travelled only rarely before. What I have in mind here is primarily Heaney’s turn toward the poetry of the everyday, where one of the most important signposts derived from his readings of Miłosz, who, in the 1990s, reinforced his interest in the extraordinariness of ordinary objects. Thereby, loosely speaking, the centre of gravity of Heaney’s poetry also shifted slightly from poetic diction characteristic of the inheritance bequeathed by Yeats – with responsibilities toward history and collective memory – to the language of things that characterizes Joyce’s *Epiphanies*.

2. *The Heartland of the Ordinary*

Heaney’s “The Journey Back”, which opens the first part of the 1991 volume *Seeing Things*, introduces the clash of duty and the everyday:

Larkin’s shade surprised me. He quoted Dante:

“Daylight was going and the umber air
Soothing every creature on the earth,
Freeing them from their labours everywhere.

I alone was girding myself to face
 The ordeal of my journey and my duty
 And not a thing had changed, as rush-hour buses
 Bore the drained and laden through the city.
 I might have been a wise king setting out
 Under the Christmas lights – except that

It felt more like the forewarned journey back
 Into the heartland of the ordinary.
 Still my old self. Ready to knock one back.

A nine-to-five man who had seen poetry". (Heaney 1991, 134)

It opens with a rather strange vision on a busy city street: Philip Larkin's shade recites lines from the second canto of Dante's *Inferno*. This is odd because the lines do not suit him at all. Larkin, who never left England and used to say that he never read foreign poetry, speaks the language of *The Divine Comedy* to talk about a sleepless watch and the poet's duty; and he evokes the cultural background implicit in the *topos* of a journey. This includes something that was close to Heaney – the romantic tradition of visionary creation combined with the duty of a tireless *homo viator*, who is always ready to go. But after the lofty register of the opening lines there appears a contrasting image, a return to the urban here and now, to a peak-time busy street and the characteristic red of the jamming buses. The pathos of the first lines is softened by the ordinariness of subsequently shown difficulties and concerns. Softened but also threatened: "Odi profanum vulgus et arceo" – the distant echo of Horace's words resounds here as if in lyrical suspense between the visionary's duty and the experience of pressing ordinariness. The romantic readiness to embark on a journey turns out to be readiness to take a step back, to oscillate between the lofty world of poetry and the land of unlimited commonness. Illumination is given not so much to the prophet and the chosen one, but to the clerk: "a nine-to-five man who had seen poetry". Instead of leading toward successive peaks of initiation, the Larkin figure simply leads the reader onto the street, among "ordinary" people.

We will find many traces of voyage in Miłosz's works from the 1990s as well. This arises, above all, from the characteristically Polish cultural experience of exile followed by a return journey to the source, to the mythical land of childhood and lost innocence. Besides lofty elegiac tones, here one can glimpse – in the few scant verses of "A Meadow", for example – a turn toward extraordinary simplicity:

It was a riverside meadow, lush, from before the day harvest,
 On an immaculate day in the sun of June.
 I searched for it, found it, recognized it.
 Grasses and flowers grew there familiar in my childhood.

With half-closed eyelids I absorbed luminescence.
 And the scent garnered me, all knowing ceased.
 Suddenly I felt I was disappearing and weeping with joy. (Miłosz 2003, 597)

An image of a meadow, an emblem of lost happiness, preserved in memory for years, comes alive in a sudden moment of retrieval and recognition that takes on the character of a special illumination – the flawless *luminescence* of a June day. The cycle of searching ends, there is a return to the beginning, and the intellect gives way to emotion (“all knowledge ceased”); the “I” dissolves in sensual fulfillment, and the subject is purified by tears. The uniqueness of the poem is determined, above all, by the context – for it is only in the company of the erudite texts of *Facing the River* (Miłosz 1995) that the simple image of this poem gains its significance. Something similar also happens for Heaney, who, in poems composed in his final decade, moved more and more frequently from intellectual journeys into the distant past (the realm of “The Tollund Man” [1975], for example) toward the land of the ordinary. In the poem “A Sofa in the Forties” (from the *The Spirit Level*), an old kitchen sofa is, on the one hand, something that “held out as itself, [...] earthbound for sure”, while on the other, it turns out to be a vehicle of time, “potentially heavenbound” (Heaney 1996a, 10). “The carved, curved ends, / Black leatherette and ornate gauntness” turn into a train carriage, which enters “history and ignorance / Under the wireless shelf” (Heaney 1996a, 12). At the same time, as is often the case for Heaney, a forties sofa, together with other objects, is a depository of memory, a witness to the formation of identity, a personal history surprisingly interwoven with the history of the Holocaust, and a return to childhood.

Heaney also gestures toward childhood in the sonnet “Fosterling” (Morzowski 1997, 7-32):

“That heavy greenness fostered by water”

At school I loved one picture’s heavy greenness –
 Horizons rigged with windmills’ arms and sails.
 The millhouses’ still outlines. Their in-placeness
 Still more in place when mirrored in canals.
 I can’t remember never having known
 The immanent hydraulics of a land
 Of *glar* and *glit* and floods of *dailigone*.
 My silting hope. My lowlands of the mind.

Heaviness of being. And poetry
 Sluggish in the doldrums of what happens.
 Me waiting until I was nearly fifty
 To credit marvels. Like the tree-clock of tin cans
 The tinkers made. So long for air to brighten,
 Time to be dazzled and the heart to lighten. (Heaney 1991, 50)

In the opening lines one is struck by the stability and stillness of the landscape, with "windmills' arms" on the horizon that sets a limit for the sense of sight. The ubiquitous stability of the image, perceptible thanks to the persistence of things in their rightful place ("their in-placeness"), is magnified by reflections in water surfaces, as if canals constituted one of the frameworks for correctly situating the individual elements of a landscape engulfed by "heavy greenness". Besides the surface which yields to sensory perception, to the authority of the eye, there is also an underground realm that rules this land, pulling it into its depths, into mud and slime: *glit* and *glar*. These words, deriving from the Ulster dialect, gain something like double significance here: they not only describe the observed world's way of being, its physicality, but they also become a specific mental landscape, overlaying the perspective of the "lowlands of the mind", rendered in translation through an image of the Netherlands. In this octave, the static nature of the landscape thus combines with the stasis of the mind; the laws of inertia and order, together with the limiting function of the horizon, describe the appearance of the world of objects, and simultaneously determine the world of language, the means of poetic expression (through the regularity of rhyme, for instance).

The heaviness of being and the heaviness of speaking – rendered through the metaphor of a boggy land – coexist in a sphere of mutual relations: language lags behind events and gets bogged down (something perfectly emphasized by the adjective "sluggish") in the stillness of what is happening. The vision sketched out in the octave has a parallel reflection – as if in the water's surface – in the opening lines of the sextet. Here, however, both the break-down of a certain regularity of the iambic rhythm and the movement that breaks into the various layers of poetic imagery unveil another plane of the poem – a plane of illumination, of openness to miracles. This is associated with a shift in the temporal perspective: the youth's way of seeing matures to finally suddenly become transformed after nearly fifty years. The wandering tinkers and their marvellous tree-clock of tin cans enter into the persistence of objects, into the heavy greenness. The semantics of the final couplet detaches it from the rest of the sonnet. The subject seems to leave the boggy land behind, carried on the wings of illumination; and this is accompanied by the liberation of words from the order of rules (the already mentioned rhythmical irregularity), and openness to what is unique and unrepeatable. The artistic construction itself, deeply rooted in tradition, thus becomes an attempt to express the experienced openness to reality and simultaneous intensification of consciousness.

Something similar was also the case for Miłosz, as we can glimpse in his poem "Blacksmith Shop":

I liked the bellows operated by rope.
A hand or foot pedal – I don't remember which.

But that blowing, and the blazing of the fire!
 And a piece of iron in the fire, held there by tongs,
 Red, softened for the anvil,
 Beaten with a hammer, bent into a horseshoe,
 Thrown in a bucket of water, sizzle, steam.

And horses hitched to be shod,
 Tossing their manes; and in the grass by the river
 Plowshares, sledge runners, harrows waiting for repair

At the entrance, my bare feet on the dirt floor,
 Here, gusts of heat; at my back, white clouds.
 I stare and stare. It seems I was called for this:
 To glorify things just because they are. (Miłosz 2003, 503)

In this poetic praise of vital energy and everyday work, there appears a sensibility similar to that of a child, who is looking carefully, standing bare-foot at the entrance to the shop. Following the law of first impressions, his senses pull out individual objects from his surroundings. The prosaic activity of shodding a horse engenders a poetry of reality, which can be read with the senses: touch (“bare feet”), sight (“red piece of iron”), and hearing (“hammer beats, sizzle, steam”). This synesthetic spectacle awakens the observer’s awareness as he views the extraordinariness of ordinary work, standing at the threshold, from where he can see gusts of heat and the coolness of clouds, as well as the horses, vibrant with life and tossing their manes; each element is important and the tiniest of details is significant: plowshares and sledge runners waiting by the river for a meeting with fire and hammer strikes. Here, the senses open something Heaney calls “the music of what happens” in his poem “Song” from *Field Work* (Heaney 1979, 56), something that lives thanks to the power of words in “the mud-flowers of dialect” and in “the immortelles of perfect pitch”, something that awakens in – so to speak – the glorification of things just because they are – an act to which Miłosz was called.

Striving to preserve contact with concrete tangible matter in its diversity and miraculous nature and sharpening the senses to the point where they can perceive the wonder of individual things – such are the characteristic qualities of both “Fosterling” and “A Meadow”.

3. *The flash of epiphany and the art of contemplated ordinariness*

The lines we just discussed turn our attention toward literary epiphanies. The Greek term *epiphaneia*, which signified an unexpected appearance or marvelous form in classical literature, initially had secular connotations. But as early as the fourth century B.C.E., this term gained a sacred dimen-

sion and became tied to the moment of a deity's revelation. The Greco-Roman world of polytheistic beliefs was full of epiphanic initiations since the realm of the gods was believed to be situated somewhere close by, almost at hand. Great gods visited mortals by taking on recognizable forms because an epiphany in the fullness of a deity's majesty would be devastating to humans – Semele tragically learned this when she wished to encounter Zeus directly. And Dionysus, who was saved from the ashes of her body, often appeared to humans as a girl, lion, bull, or panther.

The Judaeo-Christian tradition significantly enriched the epiphanic experience. This was accomplished, above all, through the mystery of God's *kenosis*, realized through the willingness to take on a human body and enter human history – something Sha'ul experienced in his dramatically tense encounter with Christ. The power of this meeting led to *metanoia*, and the extraordinary event on the road to Damascus turned out to be the beginning of a great mission. Much later, in his *Confessions*, St. Augustine repeatedly wrote about the clarity of mind that accompanies an epiphany, about contemplating the moment, and the ability to see an invisible dimension of things through their visible forms. The experience of epiphany, moreover, nurtured the Christian mystical tradition, inherently tied to the Mosaic symbolism of a flame which burns without destroying, and which – as in Pascal's *Mémorial* (1654) – leads to a great transformation. It was precisely this tradition that was later evoked by such great visionaries of Romanticism as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, William Blake, William Wordsworth, or, in the Polish context, Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki (Fiut 1998, 43-44). The history of the Greek *epiphaneia* thus unifies within itself – cumulating, as it were – the richness of the Judaeo-Christian tradition and *traditio pagana*. Its multidimensionality ultimately fully revealed itself in modern literature in the works of Marcel Proust, Joseph Conrad, and T.S. Eliot, and especially in the aesthetic theories of Heaney's eminent compatriot, James Joyce. The rich epiphanic tradition led Joyce through theology toward the thought of Thomas Aquinas and his deliberations about the beauty of an artwork as the coexistence of three principles: *proportio*, *integritas*, and *claritas*. Thomist categories were at the core of Joyce's doctrine, but whoever seeks fidelity to St. Thomas here is bound to be mistaken since Joyce interpreted these concepts in such a way that they took on an entirely new life (Nycz 1996, 20-38; Nycz 2001, 153-185; Eco 1998; Błoński 1998).

But let me return to Heaney and to his beloved "heartland of the ordinary", evoked in "The Journey Back". Many stanzas of Heaney's poetry breathe the breeze of epiphany in the same way a wanderer from the poem "Postscript" – travelling the backroads of County Clare along the Flaggy Shore – breathes in the gusts of wind "as big soft buffetings come at the car sideways / And catch the heart off guard and blow it open". This breeze simultaneously awakens the senses, which, in turn, assist in noticing the ex-

traordinariness of the image. Yet the observed phenomena are fleeting – they appear only “through a hurry”, which offers no chance to “park and capture the view more thoroughly” (Heaney 1996b, 82). The poem bears witness to what is elusive, transient, emerging only once.

The shimmering of the world, immobilized through words, also appears in Miłosz’s poem “Gift”:

A day so happy.
 Fog lifted early. I worked in the garden.
 Hummingbirds were stopping over honeysuckle flowers.
 There was no thing on earth I wanted to possess.
 I knew no one worth my envying him.
 Whatever evil I had suffered, I forgot.
 To think that once I was the same man did not embarrass me.
 In my body I felt no pain.
 When straightening up, I saw the blue sea and sails.

Berkeley, 1971 (Miłosz 2003, 277)

Here, the poet strives to faithfully translate the language of feelings, external sensations, and visual perceptions into poetic signs. He attempts to use language to photograph nature, which creates a landscape of experienced fulfillment, of ecstasy that dissolves the body’s imperfections and the baggage of memory – similarly to what happens in states of elation described by mystics. Even though “language loses when it tries to cope / With clusters of molecules” (Miłosz 2003, 606), with the ephemerality of the moment, that very moment attempts to persist in language, even if only partly and incompletely, against the laws of representation. As Jan Błoński emphasized, through their commitment to *mimesis*, Miłosz’s poems create a sense of a nearly religious concentration, they bring up that special concern and gratitude hidden in the attitude described by the Latin term *pietas* (Błoński 1998, 215-222). Heaney also remained faithful in his service to “imitation” (Heart 1987, 6-7). Yet his poems feed on the bare being of objects less frequently. Rather, they are alive with the whole background suggested by an object’s presence. As Helen Vendler pointed out, Heaney’s writing technique was closer to re-imagining experiences and things than to recording sudden epiphanies; his epiphanies are more at home with the mind than the body (Vendler 1998, 149-151).

Let us take a look at “Mint”:

It looked like a clump of small dusty nettles
 Growing wild at the gable of the house
 Beyond where we dumped our refuse and old bottles:
 Unverdant ever, almost beneath notice.

But, to be fair, it also spelled promise
 And newness in the back yard of our life
 As if something callow yet tenacious
 Sauntered in green alleys and grew rife.

The snip of scissor blades, the light of Sunday
 Mornings when the mint was cut and loved:
 My last things will be first things slipping from me.
 Yet let all things go free that have survived.

Let the smells of mint go heady and defenceless
 Like inmates liberated in that yard.
 Like the disregarded ones we turned against
 Because we'd failed them by our disregard. (Heaney 1996a, 9)

The plant evoked by the poem's title, like Miłosz's "meadow", is an object of revelation, but it is not the exclusive centre of attention. It is, as it were, the first stage of epiphanic initiation into the language of reality: a riverside landscape points toward the sought and longed for landscapes of childhood, while the plant, growing somewhere "in the back yard of our life" makes consciousness come alive and allows for the discovery of the presence of another person. Here, concrete objects act like Proust's madeleine – once encountered they lead one toward finding, or perhaps recognizing, life that "concealed" itself behind them. They become signs pointing to other epiphanies, and the poet's creative path and his earlier experiences turn out to be increasingly important. The poem is not just a record of a moment of wonder – Miłosz's "meadow" was sought while Heaney's "mint" initiates extended reflection.

In a book on modern Polish poetry, Arent van Nieuwerkerken analyzes dialogue and epiphany as two modes of experiencing metaphysicality. The Dutch Slavist argues that Miłosz evoked both of them. And "Mint" invites us to consider whether this could also apply to Heaney. Nieuwerkerken notices that Heaney's work is characterized by a plain style (which has a very long tradition in English literature) and the ability to subject oneself to the discipline of precise observation (van Nieuwerkerken 1998, 300-308; Hart 1987, 1-17). This discipline makes epiphany a means of arriving at a vision of reality through skillful observation of the world – through a certain "methodical mysticism" which Heaney describes in *The Government of the Tongue* when he comments on Elizabeth Bishop's poem "At the Fishhouses" (van Nieuwerkerken 1998, 304). It seems that we are dealing with a similar kind of observation in his "Mint", where the "art of contemplated ordinariness" (van Nieuwerkerken 1998, 304) encounters the ability to open itself up to the "language" of things. The mint plant, which is simultaneously a figure of exclusion and

omission as well as recognition and reaffirmation, gradually appears out of a heap of rubbish, and in the final verses it is transformed into an analogy of human life. The art of focus and attentive presence pulls out a shard of reality and makes it into a lesson in existence. Like Miłosz, Heaney evoked different modes of searching for metaphysicality in his poetry, and this led Nieuwerkerken to propose the category of “a modified version of the poetics of epiphany”, or, to put it differently – a mixed type of metaphysical poetry (van Nieuwerkerken 1998, 305).

For both poets, the unveiling of the extraordinariness of the ordinary was accompanied by a search for new possibilities of poetic expression. Heaney followed the path of deeply penetrating the treasures of language: he used the etymologies of words to bring out their dormant meanings, evoked the Old English tradition of alliterative poetry, and played with preserved word formation patterns (kennings) (Hart 1987, 204-231; Molino 1993, 180-201). Miłosz, on the other hand, consistently strove for “a more spacious form / that would be free from the claims of poetry or prose”, as he put it in “Ars poetica” (Miłosz 2003, 240). For many years, the epiphanic dimension of their poetry was counterbalanced by a bitter diagnosis of the world. In Heaney’s works we can see this, for example, in texts connected with the Ulster conflict, or, to put it more broadly, in texts that contemplate matter in the context of its annihilation and transience (Vendler 1998, 136-154). Miłosz’s poetry, on the other hand, contains Manichean elements. This diagnosis, however, did not stand in the way of the Irish poet’s praise of the “blessed be down-to-earth” (Heaney 1991, 14); it also did not overwhelm Miłosz’s vision of *apokatastasis* – a rebirth in eternity that allows for the transposition of the profane into the realm of the sacred. In opening themselves to the epiphany of ordinary things, both poets clearly spoke about gifts and gratitude:

Where I have dipped to drink again, to be
Faithful to the admonishment on her cup,
Remember the Giver fading off the lip. (Heaney 1979, 16)

[...] All this
Is here eternally, just because once it was.
Splendor (certainly incomprehensible)
Touches a cracked wall, a refuse heap,
The floor of an inn, jerkins of the rustics,
A broom, and two fish bleeding on a board.
Rejoice! Give thanks! [...] (Miłosz 2003, 606)

In fact, gratitude was one of the most characteristic shared aspects of their works – even at the moment when the physical distance separating them became insurmountable. We know this from a note about the circumstances in which Heaney found out about the passing of his Polish poet-friend:

I was in our back garden, in sunlight, among flowers, when the call came. There was a fullness about the morning that was Californian. An unshadowedness that recalled his poem "Gift", written in Berkeley when he was 60: "A day so happy. / Fog lifted early; I worked in the garden. / Hummingbirds were stopping over honeysuckle flowers [...]" Thanksgiving and admiration were in the air [...]. (Heaney 2004)

Both the art of observation and the attempts to give voice to things clearly point toward the experience of fullness that is hidden somewhere under the lining of the visible world. They thus point toward the metaphysics of presence. And this orientation persists, as it were, against despair and doubts, against the concerns and suffering of *The Land of Ulro* (1984). As much as they try to capture the shimmering of the world, to preserve its beauty and stamp the fragility of existence in language, Miłosz's and Heaney's epiphanies are rooted in the tradition of romantic spirituality. For they are not accompanied by the conviction (which Charles Taylor observed in his analysis of modernist epiphanies) that the moment of illumination – as in Leśmian's poetry, for example – gives rise to something that gains its meaning at the moment of its emergence, something legitimized by the very process of representation. Rather, for Miłosz and Heaney, at the basis of epiphany there is the fundamentally Platonic conviction that by noticing the eternal in the transient one is bearing witness to something that already exists. For both poets, the poetics of the everyday which raises the status of seemingly trivial and marginal trifles, actually belongs to the landscape of modernist art and literature, which puts the object in the forefront but which is simultaneously a basically romantic odyssey of the spirit that consists – as Abrams observed (Abrams 1973, 143-169) – in embarking on a circuitous journey that leads through the signs of the world to a primordial spiritual source (Hart 1987, 13).

4. *Dutch Painting*

In striving to preserve the extraordinariness of images, Miłosz's and Heaney's literary epiphanies cast jealous glances toward painting. This reflects not only echoes of Lessing's *Laocoon* or the two poets' long-standing discussion stemming from Horace's *ut pictura poesis*, but also, and above all, especially for Miłosz, it arises from admiration for the Dutch masters: "We are not so badly off, if we can / Admire Dutch Painting" (Miłosz 2003, 606). Even though various types of objects, including those of everyday use, appeared in painting as far back as ancient Greece and Rome (it is said that the legendary grapes painted by Zeuxis attracted passing birds), it is no accident that Miłosz focuses his attention on the Netherlands. For it was here, toward the end of the sixteenth century, that the first large-format paintings devoted to objects emerged. In his *Four Elements: Earth. A Fruit and the Market with the Flight into Egypt in the Background* (1569), Joachim Beuckelaer, who was

one of the precursors of this type of painting, situated the *storia* representing the Holy Family's journey in the image's distant background. Instead, the eye is drawn to full-grown cabbages, cauliflowers, artichokes, grapes, and apples that seem to spill out from the painting. This is a clear turn toward the exclusive reign later granted to objects in the realm of still lifes. "A jar, a tin plate, a half-peeled lemon, / Walnuts, a loaf of bread, last – and so strongly / It is hard not to believe in their lastingness" ("Realism", Miłosz 2003, 606). As in Willem Kalf's paintings, shiny and matte surfaces border on one another and on the intense red of a steaming lobster, fine silverware contrasts with the softness of a Persian rug, testifying to the wealth of local guilds, which were responsible for the lavishness of *pronkstilleven*. This Dutch specialty is only a step away from crossing the boundary of illusionism of the *trompe l'oeil* type, a boundary in the face of which language – which "loses when it tries to cope / With clusters of molecules" – seems completely helpless (cf. Vendler 1998, 140-143).

In more or less obvious ways, the painting of the second half of the nineteenth century and the entire twentieth century drew on the Dutch masters in its path toward the ennoblement of junk and castoffs. This was the case in Cezanne's and Van Gogh's objects, Coubert's autumn staffage, Marcel Duchamp's provocative props, as well as in the newest, multimedia, vanitative readings of still lifes by Sam Taylor Wood ("A Little Death", 2002) or the contemporary *trompe l'oeil* sculptor Gavin Turk ("Bag 9", 2001) (Stoddard, Sturgis 2005). The adventures of objects in European literature started much later than their vicissitudes in the world of painting – they received full appreciation only from the modernists (Gillespie 1986, 255-266). Objects appear in a revelatory aura in Walter Benjamin's writing, in Virginia Woolf's "moments of being", Ezra Pound's "image", Conrad's "moments of vision", Proust's involuntary memory turns, and fragments of Hugo von Hoffmannsthal's *The Lord Chandos Letter* (1995), which was particularly characteristic for the whole modernist formation³. Joyce's *Epiphanies* is equally representative. It takes visionary traditions that were close to Heaney – formed by writers like Henry Vaughn, George Herbert, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Patrick Kavanagh, along with Shelley's famous "moments" and Wordsworth's "spots of time" – and brings them into the secularized space of the new epiphanic experience, self-sufficient and cut-off from the sphere of transcendence. The path that initially seems to bring Heaney toward Joyce's visionariness actually leads him toward the tradition of romantic images, whose credibility is secured by the presence that hides behind them – a presence that guarantees meaning and depth of seeing (Kermode 1957). Miłosz travelled a similar path, even though in Polish poetry

³ It is worth noting that Miłosz's equivalent of these terms is simply *epifania*, "epiphany", while Heaney, especially in *Seeing Things*, creates his own terms: "lightnings", which, along with "settings", "crossings" and "squeringings" constitute the second half of this volume.

– unlike in English – the ennoblement of the ordinary was only initiated by Norwid (Nycz 2001, 88-114). Time and again, and perhaps most emphatically in *A Book of Luminous Things*, Miłosz described himself as a seeker of those privileged moments “when we intuitively grasp a deeper, more essential reality hidden in things or persons” (Miłosz 1996, 4). In this context, he intentionally evoked both Judaeo-Christian and polytheistic ancient epiphanies, and discussed D.H. Lawrence as the author of both “Maximus” and a poem about the taste of an apple. Besides foreign poets, he also mentioned Adam Mickiewicz’s *Master Thaddeus* (1885) which he read as “a continuation of the revelation of perceived details”: finally, he drew connections between the Japanese haiku and Miron Białoszewski’s “poem-perceptions”, which register the suddenness and brevity of “perceived moments” (Miłosz 1994, 17-22).

Heaney, especially in *Seeing Things*, where he clearly turns toward “the heartland of the ordinary”, emphasizes the process of observation and the sense of sight as he never did before. In many poems, extended descriptive parts suddenly turn seeing into vision, which – to use Neil Corcoran’s expression – is a type of “secular spirituality” or “displaced sacramentalism” where the more or less distinct sense of transcendence takes place without religious language or doctrine (Corcoran 1998, 163; Vendler 1998, 137). The picturesqueness of these poems, enhanced by references to Rembrandt, Matthews Lawless, and Edward McGuire, is sometimes reminiscent of scenes painted in the spirit of Dutch realism – as in the poem “A Basket of Chestnuts”, where the basket and the chestnuts long for paintbrush strokes and the permanence of pigments (“And I wish they could be painted, known for what / Pigment might see beyond them, what the reach / Of senses despairs of as it fails to reach it, / Especially the thwarted sense of touch”) (Heaney 1991, 24). The heritage of the Dutch masters, so valuable for Miłosz in his attachment to the sensuality of details, was to become intimately familiar to Heaney precisely through his Polish friend. During his final years, he often expressed his deep knowledge of Miłosz’s poems, especially those that suggest the glorification of things because “they are” and the contemplation of the word “is”. In Heaney’s words, these poems “opened to big vistas and small domesticities”, they “sometimes have the head-on exclamatory innocence of child art (‘O happiness! To see an iris’), sometimes the panoramic sweep of synoptic historical meditation” (Heaney 2004). Heaney frequently emphasized his own and Miłosz’s search for a child-like, innocent, and simplistically naive sensitivity (Heaney 2002). For Miłosz, the path toward child-like sensitivity, which is one of the ways of returning to the source described by the romantics, simultaneously belonged to a larger journey:

How strange life is! How incomprehensible! As if I returned from it as from a long journey and tried to remember where I had been and what I had done. I can’t quite manage it, and the most difficult part is trying to see myself here. [...]. (Miłosz 2003, 672)

Heaney embraced a similar perspective. The thematic range of *Seeing Things* is rather broad: the volume opens with “The Golden Bough”, a translation of the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, and closes with a translation of the third canto of Dante’s *Inferno*. These two poems – which emphasize the rootedness of *The Divine Comedy* in Virgil’s epic (shedding light on the figure of the guide through the underworld) – belong to Heaney’s long-standing dialogue with Dante, which includes, for example, the volumes *Field Work* (1979) and *Station Island* (1984). But through a network of intertextual references the two poems also point to T.S. Eliot’s *Waste Land* (and it is worth adding that toward the end of his life Miłosz reminded his readers of both this poem and Yeats’s *The Tower*) (Yeats 2004; Eliot 2004). This gesture clearly situates Heaney in the tradition of Eliot’s classicism. Like Miłosz, Heaney entered this framework through the act of translation, which became one of the most fundamental practices and important themes of poetic reflection in *Seeing Things* (1991). It took on a variety of forms: from the most obvious attempts to transfer older literature into the realm of the contemporary English language (something described directly in many poems), all the way to the transposition of the language of things and the record of their “pellucid clarity” (Corcoran 1998, 165). Translation seemed to be part of a larger project, which Heaney described in a parting text dedicated to Miłosz: “Miłosz would have deeply understood and utterly agreed with John Keats’s contention that the use of a world of pain and troubles was to school the intelligence and make it a soul” (Heaney 2004). By referring to Keats’s famous 1819 letter (Keats 2001, 473), the Irish poet inadvertently evoked the well-known image of *The vale of Soul-making* – a valley where this arduous process of “formation” takes place. By the same token, he evoked the romantic tradition of a spiritual journey, in which both he and Miłosz participated.

The intellectual and artistic dialogue with Miłosz and Polish poetry, which Heaney initiated in the late 1960s, helps us gain some understanding of the roots of the closeness which today connects the inhabitants of the Green Island and the country once concealed behind the Iron Curtain. During one of his visits to Cracow, Heaney spoke about his sense of being at home in Poland:

And this feeling is natural enough, since there exists a certain sympathetic understanding between the Poles and the Irish. Both countries are to some extent the invention of Romantic poets and musicians. In both countries, the preservation of cultural memory and the ideal of national independence were mutually fortifying projects. And also in both, the Catholic Church has had a deeply influential role in moulding the national psyche. (Heaney 2005, 2)

The power of translation which created a realm where two literary traditions could meet – a realm that still remains open to us today – invites readers into a space where they, like Heaney in his encounter with Miłosz’s poetry, can view their own native culture from a broader perspective, where they can feel “renewed, transfigured, in another pattern” (Heaney 2005, 1).

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