

*Polish Envy*

American Poetry's Polonising in the 1970s and '80s

## I

Weeks of reading Czesław Miłosz and Zbigniew Herbert tempt me to begin with a parable, even though for academic disourse that form easily becomes comically clumsy. Sometime around 1970 there was a rich and powerful Papa Bear who found some of his children in trouble. Those who had trained in medicine or law or science or banking were doing quite well, even though they would soon face a recession in 1973. Even though this recession, like most recessions, affected most those who could afford it least, it had repercussions that no one could entirely avoid. Yet the situation was far worse for those children who had gone into the arts, especially into poetry. They seemed to have entirely lost their way and certainly would not return for fatherly guidance. Papa Bear told himself that this should not be surprising: these were his most emotionally unstable and unreliable offspring. And these post-war years were especially trying for those who trafficked in cultural identities. For poets the once dominant New Critical paradigm for shaping their work was now quite lifeless; its fascination with paradox and ambiguity little more than a nostalgia for the class- and belief-positions that could be nourished by such abstract values. Even worse, these children were deprived of fantasies of rebellion; those of Papa Bear's children coming of age in the '60s had had that option. They, at least, could dream of replacing quiet contemplative poetry with the thrills of exploring the psyche at its most abject or pursuing the ecstasies of tuning in and dropping out. But for the younger offspring the closest thing to a new poetic—the project of submitting these subjective freedoms to the authority of the deep image—had come to seem dangerously close to bargain-basement transcendentalism, deprived of the consolations that style might afford a more secular perspective.

Papa Bear began to wonder whether the problem might be that their art simply could not find a sense of reality adequate to its ambitions. How could these poets challenge and display their linguistic skills without seeming mere show-offs and æsthetes? So he decided that as the archetypal American he had to establish for them a stable market providing a strong and continuing source of reality. Papa Bear found just this market in Poland where fortunately there were some major talents and, more fortunately for Americans at least, there was a surplus of reality that seemed ready for export.

I want now to look back to assess the results of these market speculations. In retrospect it seems clear that Polish poetry offered American writers of the 1970s and '80s two fundamental means of convincing themselves that they could have access to significant realities, despite their self-doubt. Polish poets provided what we might call an æsthetic of witnessing that made addressing political situations a fundamental part of poetry. And for those who remained leery of politics they afforded a general perspective on the self's embeddedness in the world that provided a powerful alternative to confessional and Beat versions of the lyric subject. But these possibilities were accompanied by serious dangers that I think American poets did not sufficiently address. Recognising these dangers now helps us appreciate what subsequent generations of American poets have had to work through. And, ironically, such recognition also helps clarify why by the mid 1980s the Poles found themselves relying on American imports as means of escaping the very values that they had so successfully exported.

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Everything that made life in Poland far more unpleasant than life in the U.S. (for most people) conspired to make its poetry seem far more attractive than its U.S. counterparts. For it seemed that in Poland one could not separate the æsthetic from the messiness of historical reality. Rather, form had to be tested continually for its capacity to bear witness to what was possible for the spirit that experienced decades of vicious oppression, first by the Nazis and then by Stalinist Communism. I here cite the most enthusiastic Western commentators on such witnessing. But before proceeding it is important to envision these statements as indicators of a much more general sense that Polish poetry managed to give real-

ity its due, thereby challenging any poetry willing to base its claims to attention on its pursuit of formal intricacy and its commitment to timeless meditative values. A. Alvarez, for example, claimed that the poetry of Miłosz and his successors seemed, even in translation, to be “finer than anything currently being written by any English or American poet”. For the Polish poets managed to resist oppression by taking on “the patriotic, educative, and moral burdens normally assumed by the state”. Stephen Spender argued that for these Polish poets “the very lack of freedom becomes their tremendous subject matter”: “Reading these poems we anxiously ask ourselves—can the poets imagine for us forces of humanity powerful enough to sustain themselves against the almost incredible inhumanity of the faces, the language, the means employed by the state”.

Finally we arrive at the most ambitious claims of all, in Carolyn Forché’s widely read anthology, *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness* (1993). There the Polish poets are linked with an international assemblage of writers devoted to resisting state oppression. Forché showed how a poetics of witnessing can realise two values fundamental for almost all contemporary writing. Because these poems bear “the trace of extremity within them”, they are “as such evidence of what occurred”. The poems are events that manifest traces of other events, so they dramatise the poets’ abilities to keep memory alive while redirecting the pain of trauma. And because such writing so directly engages trauma, it provides a public version of the intimate existential drama developed by confessional writing. The poetry of witness brings the confessional subject to public life, probably to the detriment of both spheres.

My sceptical note echoes a second basic perspective on these Polish poets that emerged at roughly the same time. While Forché was calling for a poetics of resistance, Helen Vendler was insisting that while American poets had much to learn from Eastern Europe, they also had to exercise considerable caution:

There are no direct lessons that American poets can learn from Miłosz. Those who have never seen modern war on their own soil cannot adopt his tone; the sights that scarred his eyes cannot be seen by the children of a young provincial empire. A thousand years of history do not exist in American bones, and a culture secular from birth cannot feel the Dissolution of the European religious synthesis.

Correspondingly poets realised that there could be a style borrowed from witnessing that did not require historical melodrama and, indeed, that might be stronger for exercising restraint. For even without a sense of the weight of history, poets could adapt to their own concrete situations the modes of attention that gave the Polish poets their convincing sense of representing a nation. Miłosz and Herbert become exemplars of a new lyric realism where personal investments take on force by their acuity to sensual detail and by their ability to sustain sequential forms that engage and encompass contradictions fundamental to late twentieth-century life. Edward Hirsch praises Herbert for a poetry shaped by “a rapacious love of the concrete” and he provides an extensive sympathetic account of Herbert’s book on Dutch painting that links “the Dutch attachment to material objects... to a basic matter-of-fact devotion to freedom”. Similarly, Robert Hass tells us that he was first drawn to Miłosz “because I thought of him as a poet afflicted by large and desperate questions”. But he eventually came to love Miłosz “as an erotic poet and poet of great inclusiveness” who addresses a wide range of particular experiences “without any loss of emotional intensity, or lyric poetry’s steady dance of being and suffering”. The sequence mode enabled Miłosz to explore a wide range of experience while satisfying the contradictory desires to blend “the intoxications of Pasternak with the sobriety of Weil”. So it should not be surprising that Hass’s own poetry made a dramatic shift after he returned to Berkeley in 1971 and became friendly with Miłosz: what had been an ascetic naturalism building Buddhist sensibility on attitudes indebted to Robinson Jeffers took on a subtle capaciousness. Hass became a poet of serial forms addressing subtle adjustments in the constant interplay of erotic and painful dimensions of experience.

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Tracing the accomplishments made possible by these imports would lead us off in myriad directions. It is much simpler to dwell on the problems involved in each of these two orientations because these were widely shared and can be easily summarised. The more political reading of Polish poetry ran the risk of so identifying with the moral aspect of the writing that it ignored much of the psychological complexity that makes poets like Miłosz distinctive as artists. For example Clare Cavanagh points out that the

stress on trauma in the poetry of witnessing produces what Herbert called an “us versus them rhetoric” that diminishes “the humanity of both sides”. And Miłosz came to feel that the American versions of witnessing ignored his agonising about the tension between fidelity to art and to history. More important, American literary sympathy with victims has to minimise the ways that his sense of history led Miłosz to Manichean thinking, to Catholic faith in transcendence, and to bitter opposition to the leftist politics of his Berkeley students. Those who witness state-sponsored terror are not likely to harbour abstract moral commitments to any kind of collective. Rather, a poet like Miłosz tends to become quite wary of just the modes of moral urgency sponsored by the calls for testimony.

Consider for example the conclusion to Miłosz’s great poem “In Warsaw”:

Was I born to become  
A ritual mourner?  
I want to sing of festivities,  
The greenwood into which Shakespeare  
Often took me. Leave  
To poets a moment of happiness  
Otherwise your world will perish.

It’s madness to live without joy  
And to repeat to the dead  
Whose part was to be gladness  
Of action in the thought and in the flesh, singing, feasts  
Only the two salvaged words:  
Truth and justice.

Here Miłosz wonders if the imperative to bear witness might be little more than a trap, locking the poet into an abstract role and preventing him from realising his vision of lyric possibility. Yet once one recognises such problems, one can also better appreciate how that imperative persists and demands that one continue to honour certain fundamental principles despite the cost.

One also has to recognise that American poets’ and critics’ urgent need for authenticity put at risk considerably more than the freedom to explore complex and possibly contradictory attitudes. These poets and critics often imposed on Polish poets ver-

sions of identity politics that distort the very Polish situation they want to honour. Poland becomes nothing more than a land of oppression and suffering. What might be universal in the poets' work is often forced into a specific political register; and what might be vitally Polish is forced to conform to an oppression-witness model of Polish life. The poet's love of detailed memory textures becomes merely nostalgia for a less repressive social order. It should not be surprising then that only a few years after entitling a book of essays *The Witness of Poetry* (1983), Miłosz felt he had to strike out against what seemed the patronising rhetoric of support provided by critics like Alvarez because that rhetoric failed to distinguish between Miłosz's prose voices and the situations elaborated within his poetry:

We should distinguish between our duty to preserve memory and our natural desire to move forward with our affairs of the living. Poetry should not freeze, magnetized by the sight of evil perpetrated in our lifetime. My objection to Mr. Alvarez's method of literary criticism is that he seems to me impervious to the dynamics at the very core of any art: after all, a poet repeatedly says farewell to his old selves and makes himself ready for renewals.

Finally we have to attend to the price American poets pay for being able to make identifications with such just causes. Witnessing makes sense as an ethical and literary ideal when certain conditions are imposed upon agents within a culture. But for American poets not struggling for racial and gender equality, there is no such imposition. In their case witnessing is a projected identification which puts all the emphasis on the imaginary roles that the poet can play rather than on the situation requiring witnesses. So there emerges a strong tendency to make the poem testimony primarily to the poet's own sensitive righteousness. It often seems that the poets seek victims so that they can have something to witness. And the poetry of witness then tends to become another rendering of the psychological horrors that confessional poetry located in the subject's inner life. Only now that inner life has as its sanction a perverse satisfaction in a proclaimed sensitivity to others. Take as an example of this exoticised and displaced confessional mode Carolyn Forché's "The Memory of Elena". The first three stanzas set the scene: the speaker is with a

companion in a restaurant and they order paella. But the present is invaded by memories of torture and murder in Argentina three years previously:

This is not *paella*, this is what  
Has become of those who remained  
In Buenos Aires. This is the ring  
Of a rifle report on the stones,  
Her hand over her mouth,  
Her husband falling against her.

These are the flowers we bought  
this morning, the dahlias tossed  
on his grave and bells  
waiting with their tongues cut out  
for this particular silence.

This is poetry written in relation to an ideal of witnessing, but it is not successful poetry of witness. For the ostensible emphasis on her companion's situation seems little more than a screen for eliciting the poet's own emotional intensities. Forché wants to capture politically caused pain on the most intimate possible level. But the lyric pressure to produce absorbing psychological events proves fundamentally at odds with the dull persistence of pain. All Forché can do is modify the confessional style in the hope that its sense of evocative lyric detail will speak for the oppressed. Yet the demand for intensity cannot but put all the burden on the poet, the one for whom the situation stands out as a distinctive emotional event. And under the pressure of this need for lyrical impact, the poem cannot allow the Argentine woman any satisfaction in the flowers or in the meal that the poem records. Every detail must contribute to demonstrating the poet's ability to feel horror at the woman's situation. Witnessing becomes the occasion for rhetorically absorbing the woman's entire life into the poet's own elaborate rhetorical deployment of her own sensitivity.

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It is more difficult to get at what is problematic in the second line of American writing influenced by Polish poetry. Here the Polish example calls forth emphases on personal speech and on forms of plenitude that have a strong place within American traditions, so

it has been far more productive than the alternative line of influence. Emphasising the modes of reflective immanence developed by Miłosz, Herbert, and Wisława Szymborska allowed Americans to preserve their fundamentally private voices, but with a significant difference. By the 1970s American poets knew that they did not want their personal voices caught up in confessional melodrama, and they knew that their sense of value in the world beyond the ego could not be relegated to Objectivist modes or to images that reached for transcendental dimensions within their acts of attention. But knowing what they did not want did not suffice to clarify what they might accomplish. That is why the Polish poets' fluid engagements with the worlds they observed and their ability to keep the personal ego involved while letting it float through several affective registers seemed quite timely, especially since the lower key also meant the self did not have to prove its power by swallowing everything within its projected intensities. One could be personal without being confessional. Moreover, Miłosz's sequences seemed to create depth while relying on what seemed the resources of enlightened domesticity. He managed to give an air of rejecting elaborate artfulness while gaining from that relaxation a capacity to develop complex, multifaceted affective fields.

Hass seems most taken by Miłosz's long sequence poems "The Rising of the Sun" and "The Separate Notebooks" because these poems transform the burden of history into the poet's intense confrontation with his own sense of limitation and despair, then they modulate their way to a gradual acceptance of a strikingly bare sense of immanence to which the self found it possible to surrender. At one extreme this sense of immanence requires little more than the satisfactions of eye and of memory as they work themselves free of the demands of the ego. At the other extreme the ego's propensity to shame leads it to seek out a sense of law within history that renders individuality fundamentally irrelevant to any large scale vision.

To capture the intricacy of Miłosz's serial poems would take an essay in itself. The best I can do is present passages from the opening and the conclusion of "From The Rising of the Sun" that indicate the pressure he puts on the sequence and the aspect of his reflection that allows him to reach a tentative conclusion. The task of the opening section is to display Miłosz at his most vulnerable and most intimate, since the forms of satisfaction he seeks from



the lyric sequence consist in finding out how these aspects of the self can be quieted and become the basis for appreciating what can be gained by accepting the limitations of the prose world. So it is crucial that at the beginning the poet's suffering is inseparable from fantasies that bring despair as their inescapable accompaniment:

This time I am frightened. Odious rhythmic speech  
Which grooms itself and, of its own accord, moves on.  
Even if I wanted to stop it, weak as I am from fever,  
Because of a flu like the last one that brought mournful  
revelations

When looking at the futility of my ardent years,  
I heard a storm beating from the Pacific against the window.  
But no, gird up your loins, pretend to be brave to the end  
Because of the daylight and the neighing of the red horse.

Vast lands, flickering of hazy trains.  
Children walk by an open field, all is gray beyond an  
Estonian village.

.....  
Never again will I kneel in my small country, by a river,  
So that what is stone in me could be dissolved,  
So that nothing would remain but tears, tears.

For Miłosz despair begins in his distance from "odious rhythmic speech". The poet has to combat the temptation to let the powers of verse hide his vulnerability by manifesting their own distinctive energies. For this self the imagination must be forced to come to terms with the prose world. But that world is frighteningly empty and disorganised. Notice how this passage offers a remarkable syntactic instability. It seems that at his age memories cut loose from rhythmic speech cannot quite come into focus but float through present tense observations so that neither world seems firm to the mind's touch. At the same time the remaining powers of mind manage to reduce the past to the marvellous banality of those "ardent years", as if what were particular urgencies could now settle into a single encompassing and slightly dismissive adjective. No wonder then that the past comes rushing in. And no wonder that the self desperate for such memories can find in them no satisfaction except this utterly melancholic absorbing of the river into his own tears.

By facing such despair in the opening moments the poet can put pressure upon his memories and begin to test how they might actually open for him aspects of the present that become visible through such lenses. Hence the next section of the poem offers “the Diary of a Naturalist”. Here Miłosz goes through an elaborate catalogue of ways that he had been taught to be a naturalist and sought the holy as an extension of nature. Yet a disturbing distance remains: his wish that nature “fare well” cannot be separated from a fear that he must say farewell to this aspect of his life. Some more abstract complement is needed, so the poem takes on an extended imaginative journey that blends alchemy with personal memories with the history of Polish poetry with various mythic projections, all as possible frameworks for bringing nature into harmony with his own sense of distance and despair. This is what Miłosz finally discovers:

It shall come to completion in the sixth millennium or next  
Tuesday.  
 The demiurge’s workshop will suddenly be stilled.  
Unimaginable silence.  
 And the form of every single grain will be restored in glory.  
 I was judged for my despair because I was unable to  
understand this.

It seems as if there is no transforming the sense of isolation produced by his intense self-consciousness. But one can finally face the fear of death that seems to be driving the entire reflection. And one can use that fear, use the absoluteness of non-being as one’s vehicle for then treating particulars themselves as the only plenitude we are likely to experience. More importantly, one can see syntax itself as the sinew of this simplicity. These lines are for the most part insistent on the future tense—both as a mark of all that is to be feared and ultimately as the tense that has to accompany any form of faith. Yet any power that a sense of the future can sustain depends on contrasts that parallel the framing opposition between nothingness and being. On one side there is the verbless, tenseless sentence giving us the pure present of an unimaginable silence, a silence that both mocks and rewards the poet’s fifty pages attempting to imagine his way out of despair. Then on the other side there is an expansive past tense that brings into the present the poet’s own judgement of his own endlessly

repeated errors. The reach backward and the projection forward give this silence its capacity to speak.

Hass's sequences are much more condensed than Miłosz's. He does not allow them the range of reference Miłosz does; nor do they assume the distanced meditative roles that occupy much of Miłosz's long poems. Hass's sense of self is less formal than Miłosz's, more American. Where Miłosz locates the vulnerability of self primarily in its capacity to be judged from some abstract point of view as having failed to meet its ambitions and talents, Hass tends to locate vulnerability within dynamics of interpersonal relations. His speakers are haunted by a sense that they are not in harmony with those they love or, more generally, by a loneliness that seems to be mocking his efforts to overcome it. And the details framing that vulnerability are much less generic than in Miłosz. Yet he completely shares Miłosz's quest for moments of plenitude that emerge as aspects of quite ordinary experience, and he shares the urgency to find such plenitude as a means of relief from anxious self-judgement. Neither poet can escape a fundamentally Catholic model of spiritual need.

Hass's richest engagement with Miłosz takes place in his *Human Wishes* (1989), a book that quietly traces the various strains and tensions that emerge when a marriage begins to fail. The topic is a common one in American poetry. But Hass's handling of it is distinctive because he has learned from the Polish poets to avoid melodramatic confrontation scenes. Poetry resides in how details are experienced and sensibilities modulated. From this perspective, then, one can treat confessional theatrics as evasions of pain because they provide such release for the emotions. It is much more disturbing to realise that typical domestic lives do not provide any moment in which the actors can fully act out the sense of absence and incompleteness that haunts their situations. The best people can do—and here Hass comes into full agreement with Miłosz—is to develop for themselves a sense of bleak plenitude made possible if they persistently refuse melodrama and stay with the complex interrelationships that form among the details that come to bear the burden of their feelings.

This sense of bleak plenitude had already been a central concern of Hass's previous volume *Praise* (1979), where the dominant lyric voice is more formal and contemplative and hence even closer to Miłosz. Early in the volume "Sunrise" offers an almost Arnoldian speaker cataloguing for his lover the various fears that

for him give beauty its distinctive power. Then the last stanza tries to understand how love itself requires a similar darkness as its enabling condition:

It is not the fire  
we hunger for and not the ash. It is the still hour,  
a deer come slowly to the creek at dusk,  
the table set for abstinence, windows  
full of flowers like summer in the provinces  
vanishing when the moon's half-face pallor  
rises on the dark flax line of hills.

Stark contrast sets the scene: love is not so much a matter of the sun's fire as of the stillness it enables. But the power of the scene resides in how these contrasts modulate into one another and take on an intense and ultimately chilling co-presence. The deer seems to relieve the bleakness and to bring a quiet vitality to the situation. However its promise of intimacy immediately evokes this brilliant paradox of the "table set for abstinence". The deer does not allow the eye a place to rest but returns it to the blankness of this morning setting. Analogously, as the table modulates into windows full of flowers, the view is forced to take in the sun's counterpart, the moon that in its vanishing imposes a pallor on the line of hills. This is a sun whose purely physical presence displaces almost all of its symbolic resonance. Yet the process of reducing the sun to its prosaic context offers another level of satisfaction that consists simply in the capacity of tense and image to hold together in a single thought the competing promises of hope and hopelessness.

Other modes of plenitude in this volume can be less bleak, but only if the mind persists in the discipline of honouring complex relationships and refusing the typical conjunction of lyric forms with resolutions that give the self a renewed sense of its potential mastery over what it sees. Take for example, the conclusion of "Santa Lucia", a poem where Hass assumes a female voice in order to work out what in the world becomes available to "an intelligence of hunger":

He wants to fuck. Sweet word. All suction. I want less.

.....

What I want happens  
not when the deer freezes in the shade

and looks at you and you hold very still  
and meet her gaze but in the moment after  
when she flicks her ears & starts to feed again.

Again a sense of plenitude depends on refusing what seems the most obvious satisfaction. She wants less than fucking provides because the fucking seems to bind one to the moment of pure exchange between the deer and its viewer. The moment after provides something quite different—a moment where the refusal of union provides a richer sense of both self and of world. For by turning away from the moment of coming together the mind can attune itself to the emergence of separate modes of being. Viewer and the object viewed are each allowed to act out their own distinctive solitudes.

In these poems the pressure to find such plenitude can be considered generic: it arises out of the imagined situations and has very little to do with any particular sense of authorial urgency. *Human Wishes* changes all that. In this volume Hass makes the richest use I know of the emphasis on particularity in the Polish poets because he makes the speaking itself a convincingly local and personal activity. What had been generalized investment in particulars now becomes an intricate and intimate sense of constant tensions and specific unsatisfied desires groping for such resolving moments. Yet this sense of subjective investment is not theatrical and melodramatic because it is located entirely in specific qualities distinguishing particular situations. To demonstrate this I will have to rely on the concluding moment in “Privilege of Being”, the first of a final suite of poems that shift from the painful incompleteness and irresolution of emotional states created by the imminent break-up of a family to the gradual emergence of new love. Unwilling just to enter the perspective of the lovers, Hass imposes on them the projected point of view of angels looking in disdain at the sweet particular rapacious bondings that constitute human love. Then he assumes something like the angel’s distanced point of view in order to work his way back into the specific structure of cares that binds the lovers. That point of view enables him to have the lovers understand why their absorption in one another might cause such disgust on the part of the angels. But such recognition is only the beginning. The poet has to appreciate how the lovers can internalise this alien perspective and can build on it in order to appreciate what they mean to one another.

For the woman the sense of particularity extends to her own “mortal singularity of the body” and so leads her to tell him that even their love will not cure her loneliness. His task then is to find a way to handle this information without indulging in the pain that would only confirm both his corresponding loneliness and the blindnesses that it causes. So rather than become defensive he concentrates on the very sense of particularity that is also the cause of the pain each feels:

He runs beside her, he thinks  
of the sadness they have grasped and crooned their way out of  
coming, clutching each other with the old, invented  
forms of grace and clumsy gratitude, ready  
to be alone again or dissatisfied, or merely  
companionable like the couples on the summer beach  
reading magazine articles about intimacy between the sexes  
to themselves and to each other,  
and to the immense, illiterate, consoling angels.

Here what plenitude the lovers can reach depends on recognising the utterly prosaic world that they inhabit. Particularity strips the world of myths but it also makes it possible to value that ability to come to terms with limitations of all kinds. Even the pathos of being merely companionable as they read magazine articles calls attention to their contrast from the illiterate angels who do not dream, and who are consoling precisely because their world must be abstract because it abides no investments in particularity and no fondness for the range of options that constitutes “the old, invented/ forms of grace and clumsy gratitude”. And the poem then can call attention to a quite different kind of reading also impossible for the angelic perspective. The first six lines in this page are all emphatically enjambed, as if coming to terms with their specific relationship entails feeling at the level of syntax how contingency and distance and possibility pervade the very structure of the lovers’ bonds with each other. In effect the lyric syntax defines the basic condition of plenitude possible if they can embrace their ordinariness and treat the loneliness as something they share. That loneliness becomes the precondition for letting their sadness be fundamental also to the terms by which they somewhat desperately cling to sexual connection, something the angels could only understand if they could appreciate what foregrounded syntax adds to this utterly prosaic situation.

American poetry is still exploring imaginative possibilities like those that Hass develops from his engagement in Miłosz. But at least two serious problems have emerged. The first one could have been predictable. If poets have to take Vendler's advice and not identify with the sense of history in the Polish poets, then the Pole's capacious realism risks becoming little more than a vehicle for picturesque intimacies best realised in domestic rather than in public situations. So we find even in Hass a constant risk that the sequence becomes inseparable from a family album—life with two children, a Volkswagen, many encounters with deer, and a justified conscience. And then Miłosz's cultivated refusal of stylistic bravura becomes a decided liability because it reinforces the sense that in such domestic settings various kinds of elaborate intricacy in thought and in style seem little more than evasive pretentiousness. Rejecting the angels might not be the best way to explore the resources of language because they may have forms of literacy that extend far beyond the domain of prose.

Second, this new realism might have arrived at a time when it was so desperately needed that it ironically proved a quite untimely visitor. For it may have enabled many American poets to face deep crises about lyric subjectivity and public responsibility without having to work all the way through the problems, and hence without having to take sufficiently radical steps to open new directions. Polish examples may have provided fresh energy and moral warrant that shored up an outmoded realism along with the accompanying ideal of the poet as exemplary sensitivity whose task ultimately was to capture the concrete vision of the world afforded that sensibility. Fealty to these ideals enabled poets to avoid the challenge of having to re-evaluate and redirect their positions as makers labouring in a rhetorically overdetermined set of cultural scenarios. By importing Polish models several influential American poets could partially evade claims that the crisis of the seventies required a radical rethinking of how American poets understand their medium, engage the dominant features of their cultural situation, and project satisfactions for their investments in subjectivity.

I am not arguing that in 1971 humanity changed and everyone should have become a Language poet. Rather I claim that a movement as limited as Language poetry cornered the market on experiment because for most poets and critics it continued to seem possible to write a poetry that, in Vendler's word's, can con-

firm “the inventive drive of lyric toward the truth, no matter in how oblique a way”. It might well have been time to suspend this talk of truth in order to explore other ways that poetry might take on representative roles in the forming of contemporary psyches. Analogously, it may have been time to turn away from stylistic models like the traditional Dutch painting that Hirsch finds so exciting seen through Herbert’s eyes. Instead poetry might have looked to visual models that might prove much more challenging to the poet’s understanding of their own possible cultural roles. Because these paths were not taken, there is considerable evidence for the claim that during the next two decades American poetry foundered. Only in the past few years do we find a large number of the most influential younger poets growing wary of a language of truth and seeking alternatives to the fundamentally descriptive and evocative modes of writing sponsored by that language. Rather than rely on dramatic or personal scenarios, these younger poets base their work on a critical demand that writing explore the range of values once sustained by ideals of poetry as a kind of truth: what do such ideals conceal about the energies that drive the imagination, and how might there be richer ways to make visible what those energies can afford us?

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There is one more ironic twist to this historical tale. Polish poets discovered this need for a new experimentalism well before the American mainstream did—largely because their younger poets had to overthrow the enormous weight of the two previous generations. Not only were Miłosz, Herbert and Szymborska major poets, they had become those who speak for Poland and exemplify what its poets “should” be doing. What were younger Polish poets to do but to turn for models engaging their own alienation to other countries, especially to the U.S., the home for rhetoric of alienation? Perhaps because he is about as far as one can get from Miłosz and Herbert, Frank O’Hara became a major influence, promising to lead poets beyond obsessions with remembering and evoking into a range of possible present tenses. Consider briefly the roles played by the then young Polish poet and translator Piotr Sommer. By 1980 (the year he had Ashbery visit Poland) his interest in O’Hara had expanded to the work of other New York poets and of Charles Reznikoff, as well as to Irish poets with a quite different sense of the political from that of his Polish



tradition. In 1986 he edited an extremely influential New York School edition of the journal *Literatura na świecie*. And in a retrospective interview in the *Chicago Review* in 2000 he set out several elements that now he could see clearly had guided his work. He positions himself and his generation as tired of political writing that was largely “preaching to the converted”. He connects this preaching to a neo-romanticism that he characterised as keeping one’s cheeks full of air, and relying on fundamentally indirect parabolic styles rather than “speaking straight”. Finally, he complains that such work had become so insistent on conveying symbolic content that the language became only a instrument for pointing to truth and so had grown careless and lost its suppleness. For Sommer, and I suspect for an entire generation of Polish writers as tired of wisdom as the U.S. was hungry for it, the poet’s fundamental task was simply to make the native language “swell a little, stretch a little”. Better that than the stretching of the imaginary ego that seems inseparable from assuming the mantle of righteous wisdom.