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THE TRANSPOSITION OF MYTHICAL STRUCTURES IN *THE ISSA VALLEY* BY CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ

KEYWORDS

Czesław Miłosz; *The Issa Valley*; Gilbert Durand; myth-criticism; myth; symbol; anthropological structures of the imaginary

The Issa Valley (written in the years 1953–1954 and first published in 1955 in the Biblioteka Kultury series by Jerzy Giedroyc) has been examined by many scholars from various perspectives. Numerous interpretations of the text centred on philosophical, anthropological, historical, religious, ethnographic, demonological, and autobiographical motifs. This study reads *The Issa Valley* through the prism of myth-criticism (Fr. *mythocritique*) (Durand 1979) and focuses on the literary palingenesis of mythemes and the transposition of mythical structures in Czesław Miłosz's novel.[1]

Initiated by Durand, academic research into myths, seen as anthropological structures of the imaginary, is still continued today in the humanities. The anthropological investigation of the imagination centres on a study of the secret

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[1] Miłosz himself, when asked about the generic classification of *The Issa Valley*, interchangeably used various terms: a novel, a "fiction" book, and a "novel", accentuating the inverted commas (Fiut 1981: 32).

structure of the human world of the imaginary – images that periodically resurface in cultural history. Jean Duvignaud argues that the imaginary manifests itself in the history of societies in the form of figurative representations. He sees this as evidence of the secularization of societies which seek to fill the areas secularized by culture with images that have mythical (sacred) origins (Duvignaud 1970). Miłosz, who considers literature "a substitute religion" and who attributes twentieth-century people with "religious imagination" (Miłosz 1983: 5), notes similar phenomena. Some post-Durandian scholars of literature (Albouy 1976: 267–272; Sellier 1984: 112–126) make a clear distinction between ethnic-religious and literary myths. By contrast, André Siganos argues that every ethnic-religious myth can become a literary myth if only it functions in a literary text (Siganos 2005: 85–100). Pierre Brunel also finds Durand's theory applicable to art and literature. He claims that mythical and symbolic elements serve as the dominant structures in all literary texts, because their function has changed. They no longer preserve images that have mythical origins, but create myths (*Mythes et littérature* 1994: 10). Frédéric Monneyron and Joël Thomas go one step further by arguing that all of literature is a contemporary myth (*Mythes et littérature* 2002).

In studies conducted at the intersection of anthropology and myth-criticism, the myth is defined, following Durand, as a dynamic system of symbols (mythical devices) – images that form narratives permanently incorporated into human culture. As a consequence of the palingenesis of mythical narratives, the ancient myth is rejuvenated through the dynamism of the story, while the universal myth, seen as the oldest verbalization of superindividual and collective aspects of the lived reality, becomes personal (individual). According to Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, *mythopoeic imagination* has a peculiar ability to generate fictional stories based on mythical narratives (Wunenburger 1994: 36).[2] Wunenburger identifies the mythopoeic activity of the imagination with human symbolic activity (Wunenburger 1994: 40).

Czesław Miłosz often accentuated the importance of the imaginary and its symbolic, timeless, and universal representations as tools that help examine and comment on the reality.[3] When asked about his interpretation of *The Issa Valley*, he said: "It is a deeply symbolic novel" (Fiut 1981: 33).

[2] Borrowed from Aristotle, the adjective poeic refers to human creation. In studies of the imaginary, the term denotes the productivity of the human imagination and its potentiality which gives rise to new creative ideas.

[3] "I was born and grew up on the very borderline between Rome and Byzantium. Is it possible – one cannot help asking – to invoke today those ancient, no more than symbolic, powers? And yet that division has persisted for centuries, tracing a line, though not always on the map" (Miłosz 1983: 4).

The Mythologem of the Family Home

What serves as a crucial context for the interpretation of the mythical role of the family home in the world depicted in *The Issa Valley* is Gaston Bachelard's anthropology, which was an important reference point for Durand. In his book *Earth and Reveries of Repose*, Bachelard discusses the image of the house of our birth and the oneiric house whose semantic field includes such notions as: complete (domesticated) intimacy, the mystery of happiness, a primal sense of security, repose, peace, rejuvenation, the first shelter, and refuge (Bachelard 2011: 69–93). On the level of the dreamer's cogito, the house, which protects against cold, heat, rain, tempests, and night (the images of a house full of light) and represents all values associated with a shelter, is thus "a counter-universe, a universe that *counters*, that is *against*" (Bachelard 2011: 82). Bachelard notes the isomorphy of the images of the house and repose: "The poetry of the house giv[es] new life to all interiority and rediscover[s] the great and manifold security of a philosophy of repose" (Bachelard 2011: 89), and the images of home and the mother (the household as a place of rest and prenatal repose – *regressus ad uterum*): "All places of repose are maternal" (Bachelard 2011: 90).

In *The Issa Valley*, the mythical home has many, often semantically contradictory, imaginary representations. This kind of schizomorphism in the depiction of the oneiric house serves as the principle that organizes literary transpositions of the mythologem.[4]

In Miłosz's novel, the village of Gine, located on a hill "thickly wooded with oaks" (Miłosz 1981: 8) by the river Issa, represents the mythical figure of "the 'Earth-Mother-of-all-things' (*pammetor Ge*)" (Eliade 1958: 247). It is a place with a strong procreative potential, as well as a chthonian chasm. Miłosz strongly accentuates this paradox, highlighting the fact that Gine is the place of birth of the protagonist, Thomas Surkont, and the place of death of his ancestors. His maternal great-grandparents are buried in the cemetery among oaks. Therefore, the novel draws a strong symbolic connection between the images of: the child,[5] the mother (both Tekla, Thomas's mother, and Mother Earth), and the place, which are all incorporated into the structure of a telluric hierophany.

[4] The network of paradoxes that Miłosz builds around all the topics addressed in his works has been discussed by Agata Stankowska (Stankowska 2013: 7).

[5] In his book *Mutter Erde*, Albrecht Dieterich examines telluric rites that were popular in ancient times: "the laying of newborn children upon the ground, the burial of children (by contrast with the cremating of adults), the placing of the sick and dying as near the earth as possible – from which he reconstructs the outline of the primitive earthgoddess, the »Earth-Mother-of-all-things« (*pammetor Ge*)" (Eliade 1958: 247).

All these images also merge into a single unity in the myths of *Tellus Mater*, which the phenomenology of religion describes in the following manner:

> The earth, then, was, in the earliest of religious experiences or mythical intuitions, "the whole place" in which man found himself. A large number of the words for earth have etymologies which manifest impressions of space – "place", "wide", "province" (cf. *prthivi*, "the wide") (Eliade 1958: 245).

Tekla is depicted as an absent mother:

> [She] came to Gine for several months out of the year, and then only rarely; most of the time she had to accompany her husband on his travels, at first in search for work, later because of the war (Miłosz 1981: 14).

In *The Issa Valley*, the image of the mother is idealized and sacralized: "For Thomas she was almost too beautiful to be real, and he gulped with love at the sight of her. His father was practically a stranger to him" (Miłosz 1981: 14). The novel contains more elements that exemplify this mythobiographical synergy, which Miłosz admitted to have incorporated into his novel (Fiut 1981: 32–35). Issa is, in fact, the Nevėžis River on whose left bank the author's home village is located (Fiut 1981: 33). The structure of the novel testifies to the process of 'unforgetting' the homescape that the author remembers from his childhood. These recollections manifest themselves in the descriptions of the place provided by the omniscient narrator, who clearly highlights his intellectual superiority and distance towards the child protagonist.[6] In the process of description, the place is endowed with a mythic dimension. For Thomas, Gine and the Issa Valley, the land of his maternal ancestors, become a space of continuous telluric hierophanies, a microcosm that incorporates the whole surrounding environment, including mountains, water, and plants. As Mircea Eliade would put it, these elements become that which is constant and which remains.[7]

The telluric hierophanies are, for instance, visible in the images of the fruit picking in which Thomas took part and the descriptions of the landscape of the Issa Valley in which spiders chased each other on the surface of the water, the beetles "danced their continuous round" (Miłosz 1981: 20), and "[s]unbeams revealed whole forests at the bottom [of the river]" (Miłosz 1981: 20). The protagonist always participates in nature's telluric mystery with

[6] Miłosz saw the potential of his novel in the philosophical and Manichean elements hidden in the world presented in the text (Fiut 1981: 33).

[7] Eliade describes cultural examples of the connection between a human being and their mother, which is analogous to the one between a human being and their cosmic environment. In this analogy, the earth is understood as a place, a chthonian maternity (Eliade 1958: 240–247).

his "heart throbb[ing] with excitement" (Miłosz 1981: 20): "Hidden in the bushes, Thomas would shinny up the willow and wile away the hours, listening and staring down at the water" (Miłosz 1981: 20). In the novel, what serves as a source of telluric epiphanies are: wild raspberries and nettles growing on the graves, oak and maple leaf garlands that decorate the church in Gine, baskets full of rose and peony petals sprinkled to celebrate Corpus Christi, and the scent of the meadows by the Issa River juxtaposed with the war-time image of the wounded and broken land on the Western Front in France. Romantic encounters with Onutė (with whom the protagonist "would retreat to their secret hideout on the Issa" [Miłosz 1981: 44]) show some features of mythical hierogamy. Thus, despite his "scrupulous conscience" (Miłosz 1981: 44), Thomas never feels the need to tell the confessor about their rendezvous in an "inaccessible palace" (Miłosz 1981: 44) on a small hill of sand ("nothing could have prevailed on him to confess their secret" [Miłosz 1981: 45]). Finally, what serves as a hierophany is the grass that grows next to a wall of bushes, "redolent of moss and wild mint" (Miłosz 1981: 63), where Thomas, suspended in a timeless limbo, reads Shakespeare's tragedies and travel books from his grandfather's library.

Miłosz endows this place by the Issa River with a mythical dimension not only by referring to its cultural telluric symbolism, but also through mythologizing time, which becomes circular through the repetition of births and deaths of Thomas's family members. What serves as a symbol that reinforces the intergenerational bonds and the circular vision of time is the oak – one of the telluric epiphanies that appears in the description of both Thomas's birth and the cemetery.

The description of the homescape also includes elements of the mythologem of the Arcadia and Paradise Lost: "The Valley is blessed with an abundance of black earth" (Miłosz 1981: 5), "care was taken not to spoil the forests" (Miłosz 1981: 3). What constitutes these idyllic, imaginatively idealized mythogems in Miłosz's novel are fragments about birds performing their "monotonous [aerial] acrobatics, signifying love", "the gabble of the blackcock", blooming cowslips, "the croaking of frogs" (Miłosz 1981: 3), stork nests on the roofs of cottages and barns, and the memory of the annual ritual performed at the grandparents' manor. As part of this ritual, grandmother Michalina would dry wild strawberry leaves to make tea, which Thomas later drank with home-made honey. In the novel, the transposition of this mythologem is part of a wider historiosophic context which Miłosz describes in *The Witness of Poetry*. He argues that Arcadian memory and the myth of Eden have strongly dominated Polish literature as a whole:

> On the borderline of Rome and Byzantium, Polish poetry became a home for incorrigible hope, immune to historical disasters. […] It seems to draw its strength from a belief in the basic goodness of the world sustained by the hand of God and by the poetry of country people (Miłosz 1983: 13).

The Issa Valley presents a pastoral myth of the countryside into which Miłosz incorporated the image of the family home as an autarky:

> Until recently, everything a man needed was manufactured at home. […] The Valley is blessed […] with the lushness of its orchards, and possibly with its remoteness from the world, something that has never seemed to bother its inhabitants (Miłosz 1981: 4–5).

He describes in detail the ritualization of the Surkonts' everyday life, for instance, the cooking of soap: "A bonfire in the orchard, a kettle on a tripod, a brownish mash mixed with a pole. […] Once the mash had hardened, it was carved up into pieces" (Miłosz 1981: 31), or the making of candles: "For that you needed cut-off bottles, tallow, and a wick" (Miłosz 1981: 31). At the same time, in his novel Miłosz introduces an artistic paradox. He demythologizes the house as a safe and intimate space. The nostalgic (and thus having a strong idealizing and mythologizing potential) opening lines of *The Issa Valley*, which present an image of the homescape, already contain semantic elements that communicate a sense of strangeness and hostility:

> I should begin with the Land of Lakes, the place where Thomas lived. This part of Europe was long covered with glaciers, and the landscape has much of the severity of the north. The soil is sandy and rocky (Miłosz 1981: 3).

In the description of the river, which is identified with the oneiric house, Miłosz uses nyctomorphic and frenetic symbolism: "The Issa is a deep, black river" (Miłosz 1981: 5); "The Issa Valley has the distinction of being inhabited by an unusually large number of devils" (Miłosz 1981: 6). The novel features recurrent descriptions of hollow willows, thickets, abandoned mills, secluded sheds inhabited by demons, and an image of "the forest witch who switches children in their cradles" (Miłosz 1981: 7). Thomas is afraid of the dining room at his grandparents' house. He is "reluctant to approach the oilcloth sofa" and "the two horribly twisted ceramic faces standing on the mantel" (Miłosz 1981: 10). He is also terrified by the pond that the local people call Black ("because the sun never shone on it" [Miłosz 1981: 9]). Pouring wax on St. Andrew's Eve, Thomas saw the horrifying shape of his lot, devilish red horns, and "it ended in tears" (Miłosz 1981: 23). His grandparents' manor loses all traces of a shelter when someone throws a grenade into the protagonist's room, breaking the glass in

the window: "The grenade had not exploded, but it might have, in which case Thomas would have been laid to rest under the oak trees, a stone's throw from Magdalena's grave" (Miłosz 1981: 77). Thanatotic symbolism is also strongly present in descriptions of the Issa Valley, as exemplified by recurrent images of hunting dogs that tear hares and deer apart, or the image of a girl with a candle, who sees the face of death in the mirror on St. Andrew's Eve. By contrast, the descriptions of the Surkont manor include images of decomposition: the roof of the house was covered with rotting moss and grass, its front part "was rotting and sinking from the dampness" (Miłosz 1981: 10), and in front of the house there were three agaves that grew in "their tubs, whose staves bore traces of rusty hoops" (Miłosz 1981: 11). The descriptions of Balthazar's house are dominated by images of incarceration, occlusion, aesthetic ugliness, and a grave: "at night he would awaken with the sensation of lying at the bottom of a pit barricaded by high walls, from which there was no escape" (Miłosz 1981: 36–37).

In *The Issa Valley*, the mythical house is repartitioned into several symbolic images in which it manifests itself: the manor, the rectory, the forester's cottage, the shed, Thomas's hideout, and the cemetery. The grotto, a mythical place where cultural heroes were raised and underwent internal transformations, is one of the most important telluric images and symbolic representations of Thomas's oneiric house. It is a secret, intimate place and, for the young protagonist, a counter-universe, a shelter in which Thomas can act like a child, playing "games that might have been thought of as too childish for a boy his age" (Miłosz 1981: 66), without fear of being mocked. It is in this secluded place that the protagonist makes a failed attempt at a symbolic initiation. Its description alludes to rites that have been well examined in cultural anthropology (separation and *regressus ad uterum* – the symbolism of the grotto and silence).[8] Yet, in *The Issa Valley*,

[8] The initiation ritual consisted of three major stages: preparation, initiatory death, and rebirth. The initiatory death, as the most dramatic part of the rite, can be divided into three phases. The first one is the killing ritual. It can have various forms: one of them involved losing one's consciousness (e.g., through ascesis or drinking magic potions), another one involved initiatory torture – mutilating one's body which is supposed to heal in the bosom of Mother-Earth. Silence was a crucial element of the killing ritual. The grandeur of death was to be experienced in silence. The second phase consisted in returning to the embryonic condition – *regressus ad uterum*, in mysteries expressed through symbols of regeneration which promise rebirth. This was followed by a journey (descent) to the Underworld. Hierogamy was one of the most important elements of the regenerative process. The third and final stage of the initiation – the rebirth – led to a "new consciousness", a change in one's existential and ontological situation. The ritual of initiation – an experience of the sacred which has so far been inaccessible to a non-secular, profane person – introduced the novice into mythical time, which is cyclical and thus never-ending. Through becoming a *mythical being*, the person experienced immortality. In the mysteries of initiation, the novice underwent a symbolic death only to be given a new life (*Rite, roman, initiation* 2000).

initiation does not have a symbolic function because it never reaches beyond the protagonist's imagination. Thomas participates in imaginary rites of passage which could help him transform from a boy to a man, a hunter. The grotto, which serves as his hideout, is where he stows his weapon – the attributes of a man and a warrior – the bow and arrows that he makes out of hazel branches. However, unlike in a real initiation, Thomas's world is a safe, imaginary place. Thus, no blood is shed when he goes hunting: "Armed with homemade arrows – for greater stability, he tacked on turkey feathers – he set out on hunting expeditions, freely inventing his game, a gooseberry patch often sufficing" (Miłosz 1981: 64). In the real world, Thomas finds hunting or even fishing terrifying. For him, the necessity of killing animals is traumatizing. When others take him hunting, he feels pressure to prove himself as a warrior and a hunter to be admitted to the world of men and to win their approval. However, he feels that he does not have the power and determination of huntsmen and, thus, cannot meet his family's expectations.

At the same time, in his novel Miłosz introduces yet another antithetical image of Thomas's oneiric house – a shed smelling "of straw and rotting apples" (Miłosz 1981: 85), located in the orchard behind a row of beehives. What he adds to the isomorphic image of a house-shelter (with strong, high walls and a robust roof that guarantees safety) is the symbolism of the hearth and the ritual of food preparation. Miłosz describes the place as

> tall enough in the center for a man to stand upright, its straw roof held down by wooden poles. The peak, formed by the acute angle of an inverted V, was reinforced with nails. A small campfire was burning by the entrance, and next to it sat a boy roasting green apples on a stick (Miłosz 1981: 84).

It was there that Thomas went through another initiation: Dominic Malinowski, "a high priest of truth" (Miłosz 1981: 85), introduced him to the world of unjustified cruelty, which is analogous to the equally unjustified cruelty of the war wreaking havoc in *orbis exterior*. Together, with his master of the initiation, Thomas collects slugs, which they later roast, watching how the animals shrink. They also torment horseflies by putting blades of straw into their bellies and a rat whom they "let loose in a tunnel of blazing coals" (Miłosz 1981: 86). The shed is the place where Thomas learns to smoke a homemade pipe and swear. Although it is described with symbols of decay (rotting apples) and thanatotic symbols (cutting insects' wings, shooting a dog), the shed, as an image of the oneiric house, has its "irresistible magic" (Miłosz 1981: 85) for Thomas. In the novel, Dominic is presented like a king and given adequate attributes: royal power, strength (physical strength and the power of character that guarantee his subjects'

obedience), maturity (he is older than the other boys who consider his company a privilege), and the weapon – a rifle which a war veteran allows him to use occasionally:

> Dominic, if the truth be known, was a king in disguise, ruling by means of an unspoken terror, the quietness of which he carefully guarded. He had been elevated to royal office by virtue of his toughness and by his talent for giving orders. Those who had tasted his hard fist obeyed him and whispered not a word of complaint to their parents. His court, which waited on him in the village pasture, consisted, as might have been expected, of his most trusted confidants, or ministers, and of ordinary acolytes, who were used for performing such menial tasks as keeping the cows in line. […] By imposing his will on others his own age, Dominic avenged himself for the humiliation he had endured since childhood (Miłosz 1981: 87–88).

Dominic's mythologization and the attribution of the teenage boy with royal features are an inverse imaginary strategy. Like the shed, which serves as an isomorphic image of the wartime cruelty of the external world (from which the Issa Valley seems to be isolated), the young dictator appears to be a small caricature of the mindless, cruel, and violent adult world, which only reproduces some behavioural patterns observed in childhood.

In this way, the mythologem of childhood is demythologized in *The Issa Valley*. It consists of recurrent images of cruelty and semes that denote fear, violence, and humiliation, as best exemplified by annual Easter rites in Gine. Thomas recalls the images of local boys who "came running into the church with a roar, bearing dead crows lashed to poles" (Miłosz 1981: 28) on Holy Saturday and the ritual of persecuting Judas:

> First they ran him off his legs, corralled him, showered him with insults, hung him till his tongue bulged, then pulled down the corpse; but lest he got off too lightly, he was flipped over on his belly, pinched till he groaned, his drawers lowered, his rear end stuffed with straw, a soul blown into him, until finally Judas jumped to his feet, screaming that he was alive (Miłosz 1981: 28).

What matches this sequence is the character of Balthazar (who, driven by a hunter's instinct, follows and kills a Russian soldier traversing the forest, having escaped from a German prison camp) or the descriptions of Antonina butchering chickens:

> Her lips puckered and cheeks bulging, she cocked the arm holding the cleaver and maneuvered the chicken into position on the stump with the other […]. The cleaver flashed […] Thomas shuddered (Miłosz 1981: 65).

The events in which Thomas participated and the thanatotic images of his childhood are presented in a manner that only seems dispassionate. Their terror is reinforced through numerous ellipses and silences, which are conspicuous, for instance, in the description of Pakenas drowning the newly born puppies of "the bitch Dusty": "Thomas walked back in a daze. […] He opened the shed door and began petting Dusty. The dog whined, sniffed him suspiciously, then bolted from his reach" (Miłosz 1981: 83). In his letters to Thomas Merton, Miłosz admits that he has painfully experienced "the burden of blind and cruel necessity, of mechanism, in Nature, in [his] body, in his psychology" (Merton, Miłosz 1997: 84), which frequently led to despair.

In *The Issa Valley*, the mythologem of childhood is often connected with a sense of abandonment ("he was an only child in a kingdom" [Miłosz 1981: 19]), lack, and absence, which are associated with Thomas's parents. Those who attempt to compensate for this lack are the protagonist's grandparents: Kazimierz Surkont, a gentle and good man who spends a lot of time in the library and loves Auguste Comte's and John Stuart Mill's books, and the eccentric grandmother Michalina (Misia) Surkont. As we learn from the novel, she

> never treated Thomas to anything and never doted over him, but what a character she was – slamming doors, cussing at everyone in sight, not in the least fazed by what others thought. During one of her tantrums, she was apt to retreat to her room for days on end (Miłosz 1981: 16).

The grandmother introduces the protagonist to the world of myths and folk demonology. In the evening, he likes to spend time in her bedroom and listen to her stories:

> Her ruling passion was magic, the world of spirits and the hereafter. […] (She never thought to instruct Thomas in morality.) […] At news that someone had been visited by a devil […] she was all smiles. Any sign from the other world – a proof that man was never alone on this earth but always in company – was enough to brighten her spirits (Miłosz 1981: 17).

However, in the imagination of the young protagonist, these mythical stories heard in the house of his grandparents become desacralized. He seems to be more attracted to the grotesque image of devils in folk demonology:

> [H]e was an only child in a kingdom that could be transformed at will. Devils, rapidly shrinking and taking cover under leaves at the sound of his footsteps, were forever imitating hens when, all in a flutter, they crane their necks and reveal a moronic look in their eye (Miłosz 1981: 19).

The fear-generating potential of the symbolism of the demons is euphemized through their animalization, and as a result of the soothing mediation of grandmother Misia – a person who has a symbiotic relationship with the supernatural world. Thanks to her stories, Thomas feels that he is not alone ("Various Powers would observe Thomas in the sun and greenery" [Miłosz 1981: 18]), and the melancholic devils help him "step outside of time" (Miłosz 1981: 18–19).

The Mythologization of the Chronotope

In *The Witness of Poetry*, Miłosz analyzes temporal structures of literary texts and recognizes their universal potential:

> One of the strangest regularities to be taken into account by a historian of literature and art is the affinity binding people who live at the same time in countries distant from one another. I am even inclined to believe that the mysterious substance of time itself determines the similarities of a given historical moment even between civilizations not in communication (Miłosz 1983: 10).

In his reflections on literature, Miłosz mentions the mythical concept of fire and its Heraclitean interpretation. For him, the dynamic potential of this element represents the past time which transcends linear temporal structures: "Literature has no one past tense, but many" (*Czesław Miłosz. In memoriam* 2004: 100). An analogous principle of finding a universal explanation is also typical of the anthropological structures of the imaginary discussed by Gilbert Durand in his theory of cultural pluralism, where time, understood as *illud tempus*, is related to such concepts as eternity and the mythical paralysis of time. Examining the presence of demonological images in the consciousness of the inhabitants of the Issa Valley, Miłosz notes: "In narrating such a story, one never knows whether to use the past or present tense, as if what has passed has not really passed as long as it survives in the memory" (Miłosz 1981: 8). In *The Witness of Poetry*, he refers to Simone Weil's theory of the purification of the imagination, searches for the *eidos* of literature, and finds its essence in the palingenesis of the mythical concept of time: a writer should rescue the past "woven with time the color of eternity" (Miłosz 1983: 114) from oblivion.

The analysis of the structure of the chronotope in *The Issa Valley* shows that its sacralization, visible in the imaginary isomorphism of sanctity, gold, and shining, serves as an important element of temporal structures. The sacred, cyclical time returns rhythmically, following the calendar of church holidays. At Sunday masses, ordinary "loudmouthed" peasants, "boys who hunted knee-deep in the water for crayfish, grabbed each other by hair, and got tanned at

home" (Miłosz 1981: 27), experience the divine grace. They are transformed into acolytes and allowed to ascend the steps leading to the altar that shines with gold.

Writing about his place of birth in *The Witness of Poetry*, Miłosz calls it one of the white spots on the map of Europe, a mythical *ubi leones*.[9] In *The Issa Valley*, he attempts to fill in these spots with his imagination; as a result, the chronotope of the novel is not quite so nostalgic, but strongly mythologized, while the structure of space and time testifies to the repartitioning of mythical structures.[10] The model of space in the world depicted in the novel is horizontal and consists of the centre and the periphery. Gine, with its church (a place that brings together the local community), and the Issa Valley, together with the house of the grandparents (an image that unites Thomas's childhood memories), form the centre, *orbis interior*, which is attributed with positive values. The periphery remains undefined, mythical – it is the outside world, *orbis exterior* – alien and weak, and thus Miłosz attributes it with negative values. The periphery is where a distant war is raging and where strangers come from. This strangeness is impersonated by grandmother Dilbin, the mother of Thomas's father, who comes to visit from Estonia ("She was, above all, different" [Miłosz 1981: 66]). Thomas blames her for his own weakness, which he believes he has inherited from grandmother Dilbin, together with her "scrupulous conscience" (Miłosz 1981: 44), understood as "a tendency to reproach himself for each and every thing" (Miłosz 1981: 75), which had a negative influence on his life and caused "many of the devil's triumphs" (Miłosz 1981: 44). The Russian soldier who is killed in the woods by Balthazar also belongs to the sphere of the unknown. The same concerns all those excommunicated from the human ecumene of the Issa Valley, such as Magdalena with "her passionate nature" (Miłosz 1981: 48). Thus, Antonina spat whenever she uttered her name, while "Thomas, even though she had done nothing to deserve it, was already prejudiced against her" (Miłosz 1981: 49).

In the novel, Magdalena undergoes strong mythologization. After her attempted suicide, the Issa Valley is haunted by a ghost – a naked girl on a white horse. In anthropology, the figure of a horse is often interpreted as a symbolic representation of the Earth element and the chthonian world. The horse thus serves as a *psychopomp*, a guide of souls in the afterlife.[11] It is used as a symbol of

[9] *Ubi leones* (Lat.) – lit. "where lions live"; unknown, far-away lands.

[10] Miłosz highlights the importance of the myths that shaped him in his childhood: "I come from Lithuania where the water snake was considered holy. Bowls of milk were set out for them at the thresholds of peasants' huts. People associated them with fertility, fertility of the soil and of the family, and the Sun loved the water snake. There is a Lithuanian folk saying: »Do not leave a dead *żaltys* on a field; bury it. The sight of a dead *żaltys* would cause the Sun to cry«" (Miłosz 1983: 9).

[11] In Homer's *Iliad*, Achilles, following this symbolic interpretation, sacrifices four horses on Patroclus's funeral pyre. Their role is to guide the soul of the deceased to Hades.

regeneration in harvest rituals that feature horseback riding, often performed by a naked girl covered with a net or only her hair, riding a white mare. The horse of the chthonian underworld, as a figure associated with *Tellus Mater*, at the same time serves as a representation of infernal kratophany.[12] In mythological narratives, horses are the attributes of Charon. Furthermore, the Arcadian Demeter, shown as a black mare and identified with the Erinyes, is a terrifying executioner of infernal justice (Karwowska 2011: 89–95). The figure of Magdalena combines two representational dimensions: the realistic dimension (a young woman, an orphan, the seductress of Father Peiksva, "poor and illiterate" [Miłosz 1981: 50]), and the symbolic-mythical one (Magdalena is depicted as a chthonian goddess "in command of subterranean forces" [Miłosz 1981: 56], the one who disturbs the peace of the Issa Valley by reanimating the ghosts of Muslim strangers – the former Tatar prisoners who used to work in Gine and then were buried at the local Tatar cemetery). Thomas's imagination also endows Magdalena with the attributes of the underworld that symbolize immortality and the paralysis of time, which "the daughter of landless peasants" (Miłosz 1981: 47) experiences in the chthonian chasm:

> He saw Magdalena in the earth, in the solitude of the immense earth, where she had been dwelling for years and would go on dwelling forever. Her dress had rotted away, shreds of cloth had merged with dry bones, while the strand of hair that used to slip down over her cheek as she bent over the kitchen stove was now stuck fast to her skull. But at the same time she was close to him, looking exactly as she had that day he had seen her wade into the water, and this merging was like the recognition of another time. […] And together they sank into the silent depths beneath the earth's many crusts, to which worms make their way and pebbles slide (Miłosz 1981: 57–58).

Because of the strong regenerative potential attributed to Magdalena's telluric symbolism, the mythologization of the female character, who haunts Thomas in his dreams, helps the child protagonist euphemize his thanatotic fears:

> [E]ven as he lay at the bottom, under the surface of reality, he could still feel his bodily self – his doomed, disintegrating, and posthumous self; and even as he was taking part in the annihilation, he perceived that the person below was the same as the one above. […] From then on, he swore never to scream if Magdalena ever approached him in the dark, confident that she would never do him harm (Miłosz 1981: 58).

[12] The mythical demons of the tempest, the predatory winged creatures with women's faces who protected the gates of Hades, were called the harpies; going by the names Aello, Aellopus, Podarge, Ocypete, Celaeno, they were also the mothers of Hermes's horses.

Creating the character of Magdalena, Miłosz revived the symbolism of archaic telluric myths, anthropocosmic images in which a human being is identified with a seed that does not decompose in the soil (Leeuw 1978: 131–141). Therefore, when people of Gine dug up Magdalena's grave, because her ghost haunted the Issa valley, they found her well-preserved body which "showed absolutely no signs of decomposition" (Miłosz 1981: 61). The imagination of the locals radically transforms the telluric myths, as all that is immortal (what serves as a sign of immortality is the shining of the ghostly figure: "both she and the horse had glowed in the dark" [Miłosz 1981: 54]), but comes from the chthonian chasm inspires their fear ("only the bodies of saints and ghosts were endowed with such power" [Miłosz 1981: 61]). For this reason, they take apotropaic action: behead Magdalena's body and hammer "a spike carved from an alder" through her chest (Miłosz 1981: 61). However, in his mythologization of Magdalena, Miłosz does not use simple mythemes whose symbolism avoids ambiguity. The character is not only connected with chthonian symbolism, which raises fear among the people of Gine, but also alludes to the telluric goddess of harvest ("That autumn – the autumn Magdalena was haunting the land – there was an exceptionally good fruit harvest" [Miłosz 1981: 62]). In this way, she becomes a literary incarnation of the cultural manifestations of *Pammetor Ge*.

The transposition of mythical structures in *The Issa Valley* takes place on numerous levels of the novel's composition, ranging from the chronotope to characterization. Miłosz makes use of mythical spatial models as well as creatively transforming the paradigms of mythical time and single mythemes. Deeply rooted in tradition, the myth of *Tellus Mater* and *Pammetor Ge*, the Arcadian myth, and the mythologem of childhood and family home are often semantically reversed and demythologized by the author. By presenting a problem in an antithetical way, Miłosz does not provide easy answers, but poses questions and opens the text to the individual hermeneutics of symbolic tropes. In myth-criticism, symbolic modelling in artistic imagination is linked to the therapeutic role of an image. It helps regain balance, or what Gilbert Durand calls "anthropological balance" (Durand 2003: 116), which serves, according to Ernst Cassirer, as evidence of human innate symbolic intelligence (Cassirer 1974). Miłosz admitted that writing *The Issa Valley* was a form of self-therapy (*Czesława Miłosza autoportret przekorny*… 1988: 36). He also mentions the therapeutic power of the imagination several times in *The Witness of Poetry*. Imagination, according to Miłosz, helps a poet face the "gloom" (Miłosz 1983: 18) of historical reality and avoid "pessimism" (Miłosz 1983: 18), "a minor mode" (Miłosz 1983: 17), and "a gloomy apocalyptic tone" (Miłosz 1983: 115), which, as he argues, are characteristic of twentieth-century literature.

He accentuates the redemptive potential of symbolic-mythical foundations of the imaginary and perceives literature as "an autonomous, self-sufficient unit, no longer describing the world but existing instead of the world" (Miłosz 1983: 19).

Translated by Katarzyna Ojrzyńska

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THE TRANSPOSITION OF MYTHICAL STRUCTURES IN *THE ISSA VALLEY* BY CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ

(abstract)

The article interprets Czesław Miłosz's novel *The Issa Valley* through the prism of myth-criticism, which was introduced to the humanities by Gilbert Durand. In particular, it focuses on the palingenesis of literary mythemes and the transposition of mythical structures that can be found in various aspects of the text, including the chronotope of the novel and the construction of its characters. Moreover, *The Issa Valley* features

mythical models of space as well as paradigms of mythical time and individual mythemes transformed by Miłosz's artistic imagination. The author of *The Issa Valley* semantically inverts and demythologizes the myths of *Tellus Mater*, *Pammetor Ge*, and the Arcadia, the mythologem of childhood, and the mythologem of family home, which are all deeply rooted in tradition. Miłosz addresses each problem in an antithetical manner, avoiding simple answers. Instead, he poses questions and thus opens the text to the individual hermeneutics of symbolic tropes. Miłosz perceived the imaginary that has symbolic and mythical foundations as endowed with a redemptive potential. In myth-criticism, the symbolic modelling that takes place in the artistic imagination is closely connected with the therapeutic role of an image. It helps restore internal balance which Gilbert Durand defines as anthropological balance. And, as Ernst Cassirer posits, this balance is a manifestation of human symbolic intelligence.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE

Czesław Miłosz; *Dolina Issy*; Gilbert Durand; mitokrytyka; mit; symbol; antropologiczne struktury wyobraźni