

Nature and People. Tadeusz Śliwiak's Ecological imagination

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“(…) wir in einer dem Baum abholden Zeit leben. Die Wälder schwinden, die alten Stämme fallen, und es erklärt sich nicht durch Ökonomie allein. Die Ökonomie ist hier nur mitwirkend, ist volziehend, denn zugleich leben wir in einer Zeit, in der auf unerhörte Weise verschwendet wird. Das entspricht ihren beiden großen Tendenzen: der Nivellierung und der Beschleunigung. Das Hohe muss fallen, und das Alter verliert seine Macht.”¹.

The dream of nature

Tadeusz Śliwiak, renowned as a poet belonging to the generation of 1956, adopts a non-anthropocentric point of view in his works. He takes the side of nature and recognizes the damage caused to it by man. Artur Sandauer writes that the poet: “adopted Horatio’s motto *naturam sequi*, to follow the natural order, as his own. In his poetry, he attempts to describe the essential experience of man coming into active contact with nature, of man transforming it.”² Piotr Kuncewicz observes that “in general, the two spheres of this poetry are the beautiful world of nature and the trauma of suffering, disability, death.”³ Respectively, Konstanty Pieńkosz argues that “Śliwiak describes [...] the world in such a way as to show the servitude of nature in relation to man. He notices traces of the bond between man and nature everywhere.”⁴ Andrzej Juchniewicz observes that “one cannot ignore the poet’s pioneering work in the field of ecological imagination.”⁵ As pointed out by the critics, Śliwiak had a unique relationship with nature, which

¹ E. Jünger, *Bäume*, Munich 1977, p. 67.

² A. Sandauer, *Poezja tragicznego ładu. (Rzecz o Tadeuszu Śliwiaku)* [Poetry of the tragic order (Tadeusz Śliwiak)], in: idem, *Zebrane pisma krytyczne. Studia o literaturze współczesnej* [Collected critical essays: Studies on contemporary literature], Warsaw 1981, p. 483.

³ P. Kuncewicz, *Tadeusz Śliwiak*, in: idem, *Agonia i nadzieja* [Agony and hope], vol. 3: *Poezja polska od 1956* [Polish poetry since 1956], Warsaw 93, p. 241.

⁴ K. Pieńkosz, *Świat nadziei paradoksalnej* [The world of paradoxical hope], in: T. Śliwiak, *Koń maści muzycznej* [Musical horse], prefaced and edited by K. Pieńkosz, Kraków 1986, p. 12.

⁵ A. Juchniewicz, *Z czyścica na Parnas* [From Purgatory to Parnassus], “Śląsk” 2020, no. 5, p. 63.

had to do with his childhood experiences of living with his family in the municipal abattoir in Lvov. At the time, he saw nature as a desired and pristine sphere of harmony and order, a place beyond human interference and beyond evil, which he witnessed daily in the slaughterhouse, in particular in the inhumane treatment of animals and Jewish workers.⁶ “[...] to return to nature, you must first exist as a subject that is separate from it,” Julia Fiedorczuk writes.⁷ Growing up in an abattoir during the Second World War, Śliwiak was separate from nature.⁸ Wishing for green spaces, he immersed himself in them above all in his imagination. In the poem *Rondo*, published in his ingenious collection *Poemat o miejskiej rzeźni* [The poem about the municipal abattoir] (1965), Śliwiak goes back to and reflects on his childhood, looking at himself “from the outside.”⁹

I ran from the abattoir to the forest to wash my eyes and my hands
from the sight and matter of warm animal blood

And the scream that was inside me now became a voice
it rubbed against the bark of tall pine trees

A thorny bush surrounded me Soft moss embraced me
The trees stood dignified Their knots were bleeding

The green forested sky has quieted down
I looked at my hands They were clean again

As if a bird flew from them and made me and
itself free And it sang And it did not blame me¹⁰

⁶ Critics have commented on Śliwiak's childhood in Lviv and the fact that he witnessed the killing of animals and Jews, seeing the annihilation of both as equally cruel, thus acknowledging the fact that animals were the victims of war. See: K. Niesporek, *Zwierzęta i ludzie. O Poemacie o miejskiej rzeźni Tadeusza Śliwiaka* [Animals and people: The Poem about the municipal abattoir by Tadeusz Śliwiak], “Porównania” 2021, no. 2 [in press] and P. Sobolczyk, “Ty jesteś krowa a ja Żyd”. *Tadeusza Śliwiaka Holocaust zwierząt* [‘You are a cow and I am a Jew’: Tadeusz Śliwiak writes about the Holocaust of animals], “Pogranicza” 2009, no. 5, p. 28–40.

⁷ J. Fiedorczuk, *Cyborg w ogrodzie. Wprowadzenie do ekokrytyki* [Cyborg in the garden: Introduction to ecocriticism], Gdańsk 2015, p. 66.

⁸ In the preface to *Poezje wybrane* [Collected poems] from 1975, Tadeusz Śliwiak thus writes about his contact with nature: “From the window of our apartment I could see the huge building of the cold store and the halls where animals were killed. There was a tannery on the other side of the street. Old chestnuts grew not far from my house. There were many. We, the local boys, liked them. They were green for a long time. Like long holidays which we truly experienced only after the war”; “Today, one of my favorite places which I visit most often are the wild Bieszczady Mountains. They are so different from that city (Lviv - K.N.) built with stone.” T. Śliwiak, *Wstęp* [Preface], in: idem, *Poezje wybrane* [Collected poems], prefaced and edited by the poet, Kraków 1975, p. 10.

⁹ Cf. J. Bennett, *Emphatic vision: Affect, trauma, and contemporary art*, Stanford 2005.

¹⁰ T. Śliwiak, *Rondo*, in: *Poemat o miejskiej rzeźni* [The poem about the municipal abattoir], Kraków 1965, p. 23:
Biegłem z rzeźni do lasu obmyć oczy ręce
z widoku i materii ciepłej krwi zwierzęcej
A ten krzyk co był we mnie teraz stał się głosem
ocierał się o korę wyprężonych sosen
Ostry krzew mnie otoczył Mech przygarnął miękki
Drzewa stały dostojnie Krwawiły ich sęki
Uciszyło się niebo zielone lesiste
Patrzyłem w moje dłonie Były znowu czyste
Jakby ptak z nich uleciał i wolnym uczynił
mnie i siebie I śpiewał I za nic nie winił

The lyrical I finds refuge in nature. His very escape to the forest demonstrates that the poet cannot accept the transgression of moral boundaries taking place in the abattoir. In the forest, he seeks understanding and purification “from the sight and matter of warm animal blood.” Śliwiak inverts the biblical ritual of sacrifice in the poem. In the Epistle to the Hebrews, we read: “[...] the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a young cow, sprinkling those who are defiled, sanctify for the purification of the flesh” (Hebrews 9:13). The goal is to restore balance, “allowing a person or an unclean thing to return to normal life.”¹¹ However, in Śliwiak’s poem, the purpose of shedding blood and its meaning changes. It does not cleanse but corrupts, it is a symbol of the cruelty of war and the abattoir – it dries on the body, occupying the mind of the lyrical I. Witnessing slaughter, as Freud argues, exposes the artist to numerous stimuli in a very short time;¹² the unspeakable emotions build up in the lyrical I and they are expressed only in the open space – in the forest. Screaming, uttering what has been suppressed, brings relief. The lyrical I who wishes to find refuge and purification in the forest does not harm the animals, but he feels responsible for the evil done to them by people. He sees “the red sea of the slaughter” and is unable to save the lives of the innocent, be it animals or Jews. He feels their pain. Nature, on the other hand, plays the role of an absolute that opens up to human pain and absolves it. The forest surrounds the lyrical I with care and tenderness and thus suffers with the I. By taking the poet’s pain onto itself, the forest frees and cleanses the I of bad emotions. The scream is temporarily replaced by silence. Red blood is replaced with green trees. Bloody hands turn clean. The lyrical I no longer feels guilty. At least for a moment, he is not confined to the experience of the abattoir but thinks about freedom and the end of war. However, peace and absolution found in nature do not last long:

And here I can hear a shot and noises in the hazel trees nearby
And here is a man with a shotgun and an animal covered in blood¹³

The forest opens up to man and accepts him, but man feels that he is superior to nature: he goes far too far and constantly comes into conflict with it. Ultimately, the reality of the slaughterhouse, from which the artist tries to escape, catches up with him at every step. It comes back, again and again, when he least expects it, as if the poet was forever doomed to repeat it. The poet’s idea of “ecological dreams” of wild and “pristine” nature, to which he did not have access before, are thus quickly verified and forgotten. In the forest, apart from desired nature, the poet almost always meets a hunter or a lumberjack whose actions have a negative impact on the environment. While nature is supposed to be pristine and open to all, it is nevertheless appropriated by man. And, as Śliwiak writes, man cannot / does not want to accept “that he is just one of many living creatures inhabiting this Earth, an unprivileged element of the

¹¹M. Wróbel, *Oczyszczenie* [Purification], in: *Encyklopedia katolicka* [Catholic encyclopedia], vol. XIV: *Nouet – Pastoralis Officii*, Lublin 2010, p. 296.

¹²S. Freud, *A general introduction to psychoanalysis*, London 2012, p. 95.

¹³I oto strzał i łoskot w leszczynie pobliskiej
i człowiek z dubeltówką i zwierz we krwi śliskiej
T. Śliwiak, *Rondo...*, p. 23.

biosphere.”¹⁴ On the contrary: he tries to dominate and govern it.¹⁵ Śliwiak wants to blur the differences between nature and man – he wants both to coexist; he wants mutual understanding. Or, Artur Sandauer writes, pointing to the “biological or geological concerns” found in the poet’s works, Śliwiak wants “active contact,” “friction.”¹⁶

The greatness and benevolence of nature

In his works, Śliwiak provides the reader with insight into nature. Trying to describe how it may be experienced and how it functions in the Anthropocene, he allows “non-human elements of nature” to speak, thus fulfilling the ecocritical “postulate of speaking on behalf of the environment.”¹⁷ In the volume *Widnokres* [Horizon] (1971), in the section *Ziemia* [The Earth], in the poem *Oratorium* [Oratorio], Śliwiak succinctly describes his approach to nature. The title of the poem is connected with “a monumental musical composition for soloists, choir and orchestra”¹⁸ (in the poem, the collective subject speaks: it is a choir of trees which describe how they function at particular stages of life) and a place of worship, “communal or individual prayer, the acquisition of wisdom and virtue [...]”¹⁹ In the poem, the forest, called the oratorio, stands for a sacred space, an absolute that should be cherished, while nature defined as “the domain of harmony, innocence and pristine beauty” stands “in opposition to those aspects of culture that are corrupt, degenerate or – to refer to the language of theology – sinful.”²⁰

The poem comes in three parts. In the first part:

Our trunks are pregnant
 our trunks are like bells
 bells that are made of resin ores inside us
 we hang them all over the forest
 the wind rings them
 announcing golden autumn
 then we become a light-leaved orthodox church
 of the forest rite
 where the sun is askew
 and the incense, like fog, walks on the moss
 hawthorn bushes perform the blood sacrifice
 and bird choirs in green clouds
 sing ejaculatory prayers

¹⁴J. Fiedorczyk, *Cyborg w ogrodzie...*, p. 53.

¹⁵Cf. J. Tabaszewska, *Wstęp. Ekokrytyczna (samo)świadomość* [Introduction: Ecocritical (self) awareness], “Teksty Drugie” 2008, no. 2, p. 12.

¹⁶A. Sandauer, *Poezja tragicznego ładu...*, p. 482–483.

¹⁷J. Tabaszewska, *Wstęp...*

¹⁸M. Głowiński, *Oratorium* [Oratorio], in: M. Głowiński, T. Kostkiewiczowa, A. Okopień-Sławińska, J. Sławiński, *Słownik terminów literackich* [Dictionary of literary terms], Wrocław – Warsaw – Kraków 2007, p. 360.

¹⁹W. Partyka, *Oratorium* [Oratorio], in: *Encyklopedia katolicka*, vol. XIV: *Nouet – Pastoralis Officii*, Lublin 2010, p. 711.

²⁰J. Fiedorczyk, *Cyborg w ogrodzie...*, p. 41.

because autumn is the season of fulfillment
because autumn is our summa²¹

In his persona poems, Śliwiak gives voice to those who have been deprived of subjectivity. The trees speak in the first-person plural and thus are able to present their perspective – personification is employed throughout the entire poem. The forest without man is free; it is governed by its own rules. Recalling the past, trees look back at the time of their glory. The “pregnant trunks” symbolize resistance, strength, durability, and hardness. They are, as Gaston Bachelard puts it, great images of power, they embody virtue and they testify to self-sacrifice and humility (“brimant ses propres élans, toutes les paresseuses impulsions du végétalisme vert et tendre”). Though they may appear to be invincible,²² deep down they are sentient, which is reflected in the “trunks that (are/ sound) like bells.” Manfred Lurker writes that the wind enters the trees and acquires a voice: the tree groans and moans; something whispers and murmurs in the treetops.²³ The resin secreted by the bark is associated with the bells hanging on the branches. The trees say that the resin is like “ore,” implying that it is a precious raw material. Indeed, its healing properties prove its value – it is used to heal the “wounds of the tree.” Nature is self-sufficient, it relies on itself. The choir of trees repeats the phrase “our trunks” twice. The use of the possessive pronoun shows that they are not owned by humans. Nature is reborn, it feels free, it follows its own rhythm, determined by the change of seasons. Autumn is celebrated in the pristine forest. Interestingly, it is not seen as a time of bloom, impermanence, fragility, fading away, or imminent death. It is a time when the power of trees is revealed and celebrated. Mircea Eliade writes that:

[...] a tree is full of sacred powers because it is vertical, it grows, it loses its leaves and grows new ones, and so it regenerates (“dies” and “rises”) an infinite number of times, it has resin, etc. The source of all these justifications is a simple mystical contemplation of the tree as a “form” and as an alteration of biological life. [...] The tree becomes sacred because of its power, that is, because it shows an extra-human reality which is revealed to man in a specific shape, bearing fruit and cyclically renewing itself.²⁴

²¹T. Śliwiak, *Oratorium* [Oratorio], in: idem, *Widnokres* [Horizon], Warsaw 1971, p. 111:

Nasze pnie ciężarne
dzwonne nasze pnie
z żywicznego kruszcu wiążą się w nas dzwony
rozwieszamy je po całym lesie
wiatr je kołysze
dzwoni jesień złotą
wtedy stajemy się światłolistną cerkwią
leśnego obrządku
gdzie słońce stoi ukośnie
i chodzą po mchu mgieł kadzidła
krzewy głogów spełniają ofiarę krwi
a ptasie chóry w zielonych obłokach
śpiewają akty strzeliste
bo jesień jest porą spełnienia
bo jesień to nasza summa.

²²G. Bachelard, *La Terre Et Les Rêveries De La Volonté*, Paris 1948, p. 67; 120-123.

²³M. Lurker, *Der Baum in Glauben und Kunst: unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Werke des Hieronymus Bosch*, Strasburg 1960, p. 250.

²⁴M. Eliade, *Roślinność: symbole i rytzy odnowienia* [Vegetation: symbols and rites of renewal], in: idem, *Traktat o historii religii* [Treatise on the history of religion], trans. J.W. Kowalski, Warsaw 2009, p. 280–281.

The choir of trees reveals the secrets of nature to the reader. The forest lies beyond the sphere of the human; it turns into a sacred place where the cyclical sacred rites of nature take place. The trees transform in the process. They are filled with metaphysical light; they turn red, brown, and yellow and become "light-leaved." This is the side of the forest that is difficult to describe, alien and inaccessible to man, hence the neologism. It turns out that the forest ritual is governed by its own rules and draws on Catholic liturgy. Fog is associated with incense, pointing to the presence of a deity in the forest. The red fruits of hawthorn trees are a reminder of Christ's "blood sacrifice" and symbolize his suffering; respectively, they represent the Old Testament rite of sprinkling animal blood, in itself a propitiatory ritual. Birds sing "ejaculatory prayers," addressing deities "in order to establish [...] a spiritual connection."²⁵ The prayers are sung "in green clouds," i.e., in the treetops. The choir of trees explains that they mediate between heaven and earth, the higher and more powerful they are, the closer they are to the absolute or, as Mircea Eliade writes, they become the "seat of the deity."²⁶

The forest knows its value; it defends itself against any attempts to disturb its peace and order:

We were once the Kingdom of Dark forests
 forests inaccessible to strangers
 guarded by bears and wildcats
 a daredevil who dared to enter
 was scared by a hissing snake
 and poisonous berry
 decaying glowing trunks
 and the owl-eyed night
 Like great monarchs
 in arborescent crowns
 we have ruled over this land for centuries
 only our equals
 hunters and falconers were allowed to enter²⁷

²⁵J. Zbiciak, *Akt strzelisty* [Ejaculatory prayer], in: *Encyklopedia katolicka* [Catholic encyclopedia], vol. 1: *A i Ω - Baptyśc* [A and Ω - Baptists], ed. F. Gryglewicz, R. Łukaszyk, Z. Sułowski, Lublin 1973, p. 275.

²⁶M. Eliade, *Roślinność: symbole i rytmy odnowienia...*, p. 283.

²⁷T. Śliwiak, *Oratorium...*, p. 111–112.:

My niegdyś księstwa lasów burych
 dla obcych niedostępne knieje
 przez niedźwiedzie kudłate strzeżone i żbiki
 śmiałka co się tu zapuszczał
 płoszyliśmy sykiem żmii
 i trującą jagodą
 próchnem święcących pni
 i sowiooką nocą
 Jak monarchowie wielcy
 w rosochatych koronach
 od stuleci tą ziemią włodarząc
 tylko równym sobie dawaliśmy drogę
 łowcom i sokolnikom.

The trees, speaking from a contemporary perspective, constantly return to the past. Calling themselves “great monarchs / in arborescent crowns” and ruling over independent “kingdoms of dark forests,” they go back to the times when they were admired, respected, and revered – perceived as superior to all other living creatures.²⁸ As Bachelard puts it, trees once inspired greatness and pride in men, and could also calm men down, bringing relief and reassurance. “Le chêne n’arrête-t-il pas jusqu’au nuage qui passe?” further asks Bachelard, emphasizing the unlimited divine power of trees.²⁹ In the past, the forest was the sphere of the mysterious, the powerful, and the untamed. Intruders were not allowed. The forest was guarded by wild animals and plants. On the other hand, forests could also be generous, providing shelter and respite. Nature, as it is stated in the Book of Genesis, was governed by man, but in a completely different dimension:

The nature of the tree reveals the power of life. Sitting under knotted tree trunks that had survived more than one generation, people realize how short their own lives are. They took the life force from the tree in the form of fruit. They wished to find a cure for various diseases in leaves and flowers. They modelled their houses and tents on the branches which formed the roof over their heads. Flowering, fruiting, the annual dying and rebirth, pointed to a higher power, which made man hope he could overcome death.³⁰

The crisis of nature

The fact that nature gives us so much ultimately did not lead to the establishment of a bond between nature and man, but to man’s “emancipation”³¹ and dreams of conquest. The forest, which is governed by its own rules, is now subjected to human hegemony. The biocentric perspective gives way to that of the anthropocentric. In the second part of *Oratorium*, Śliwiak writes:

[...]
 We are trees that used to be great and mighty
 today we are abandoned by our defenders
 we are no longer guarded by their fangs and claws
 bears on a chain dance with the gypsies
 wildcats cry in cages
 wild boars run away at the sight of man
 we are waiting in forest ghettos
 for the torturers who arrive at dawn
 with sharp shiny tools
 used to kill us and drag our chopped bodies

²⁸M. Lurker, *Der Baum in Glauben und Kunst ...*, p. 239.

²⁹G. Bachelard, *La Terre Et Les Rêveries De La Volonté...*, p. 69.

³⁰M. Lurker, *Der Baum in Glauben und Kunst ...*, p. 245. Translated by M. Olsza.

³¹J. Fiedorczuk, *Cyborg w ogrodzie...*, p. 41.

We were once great
today we are vulnerable trees³²

Describing the changes that have taken place in nature, the choir of trees looks at the past and the present. Trees are no longer able to defend themselves. However, it is not the plants that die first but the animals. As a child, the poet lived in the municipal abattoir which made him particularly sensitive to the suffering and unethical treatment of animals. Instead of enjoying their freedom in the forest, their natural habitat, animals are tamed and “broken” by man. The process of domestication removes the barrier that exists between people and animals, mentioned in the previous stanza, which so far has protected the forest from intruders. The act of conquering “the dangerous animal nature,” fear and danger, allows a person to truly enter the forest. The bears, wildcats and boars that used to be on their guard are now trained and domesticated. As a result, as Tadeusz Sławek writes, “the animal becomes human and loses its true wild nature [...]” on the other hand, it cannot be “subjected to the laws of culture.”³³ While bears adapt to the situation and “dance on a chain,” other creatures rebel, suffer, and try to defend themselves: “wildcats cry in cages” and “wild boars run away at the sight of man.” When wild animals are tamed and gone, forests turn from “light-leaved orthodox churches” into “ghettos,” where trees no longer have any power. Lumberjacks rule over them. The choir of trees knows when and why they come. They know that they will die and prepare for it every morning, calling lumberjacks torturers. Indeed, they are barbarians, executioners, tormentors, murderers. In a different poem by Śliwiak, the tree says: “[...] z siekierą na ramieniu / idzie człowiek przez las / boję się jego oczu / boję się jego pomysłów” [...] with an ax on his shoulder / a man is walking through the forest / I’m afraid of his eyes / I’m afraid of his ideas.³⁴ It is people, not nature, that are unpredictable. For whoever puts an axe to a tree uproots it, radically destroys it, kills it.³⁵ Just holding an axe gives man unlimited power over the forest. When the executioner comes, Śliwiak writes in the volume *Widnokres*, “nim pierwszy topór w pierwszy pień uderzy” [before the first axe strikes the first trunk], nature fades away, withers, changes its colors (“ciemnieje zieleń mech swą miękkość traci” [the green moss loses its softness]), sends warning signals (“ptak ponad gniazdem kołuje spłoszony” [the bird flies over the nest, alarmed], “wiatr się zrywa” [the wind blows], “w źródłach rdzawy pojawia się naciek” [rust appears in the springs], “świecą pnie spróchniałe” [rotten trunks shine]), gets scared and hides (“głębiej się chowa rudy lis w swej Jamie” [the red fox hides deeper in its den], “ślepe

³²T. Śliwiak, *Oratorium...*, p. 112:

[...]
My drzewa niegdyś wielkie i mocarne
dziś opuszczone przez naszych obrońców
już nas nie strzegą ich kły i pazury
niedźwiedzie na łańcuchu tańczą z Cyganami
źbiki płaczą w klatkach
odyńce uciekają na widok człowieka
my w leśnych gettach zamknięte czekamy
na oprawców idących o świcie
z narzędziem ostrym namaszczonym światłem
aby nas zabić i wywlec obrąbane ciała
My niegdyś wielkie
dziś bezbronne drzewa.

³³T. Sławek, *Zwierzę, człowiek i wspólnota losu. O węzłach, drożdżach i tym, co jest nami* [Animal, man and shared lives: Snakes, thrushes and our problems], in: *Zwierzęta i ludzie* [Animals and men], collected volume, ed. J. Kurek and K. Maliszewski, Chorzów 2011, p. 19, 23–24.

³⁴T. Śliwiak, *Drzewo* [Tree], in: idem, *Solizman*, Warsaw 1981, p. 26.

³⁵W. Kopaliński, *Topór* [Axe], in: idem, *Słownik symboli* [Dictionary of symbols], Warsaw 1990, p. 428.

sowy dziób chowają w pierze / kryją swą bladość pod liściem podbiały” [blind owls hide their beaks in their feathers / they hide their pallor under the leaves of a coltsfoot]), and try to defend their territory with whatever strength they have left in them (“ścieżki zarasta blekot i pokrzywa” [the paths are overgrown with poison parsley and nettle]). On the other hand, trees, sensing a threat, “w pniach twardnieją” [harden in their trunks]. Trying to avoid extermination, their successive layers bond, unite; they do everything they can to make it difficult for man to tear them apart and hurt them. The tree, as Gaston Bachelard observes, “il se noue pour s’appuyer, non plus sur un humus riche et faible, mais pour s’appuyer sur soi, sur cette réserve de dureté qu’est un tronc nouveau. Il devient dur pour durer.”³⁶ It is the accepted but not always effective line of defense. Ultimately, when man comes, nature is defenseless against him. In another poem by Śliwiak we read:

the tree that fell
under the blow of an axe
did not kneel
it did not cover itself with its branches

there is a resin scent in the air
there is a stump with its branches cut off on the ground
stupefied³⁷

Trees die standing up. This is what they have to face. They do not ask mercy from their torturers or ask for their lives to be spared. Proud, they humbly accept their fate. In the last stanza of *Oratorium*, the choir of tress says: “[...] nie wiemy czym jest ucieczka / znamy dla siebie tylko jedną drogę / wzwyż do światła” “[...] we do not know how to run / we only know one way / up towards the light].³⁸ They live. They do not want to die. They want to build their power, to go towards “niebiańskich sfer kosmicznych” [heavenly cosmic spheres], the metaphysical and the sacred. The remnant of the tree’s power is the “stump with its branches cut off.” Shocked to see its most important part die, they are “stupefied.” As such, to quote Witold Doroszewski, they are “standing still, shocked, not able to move, terrified, numb.” Peter Wohlleben asks: “And what if you cut a tree down? Is it then dead? And what about centuries-old stump [...]? And if it isn’t, then what is it?”³⁹ When an axe cuts into it, the trunk is wounded, it becomes lonely, it has to redefine itself and its role in the forest. “Are these trunks now young tress or, alternatively, are they really thousands of years old?” Wohlleben asks. Henry D. Thoreau writes in one of his essays: “The owner of the axe, as he released its hold on it, said that it was the apple of his eye; but I returned it sharper than I received it.”⁴⁰ In the “forest

³⁶G. Bachelard, *La Terre Et Les Rêveries De La Volonté ...*, p. 65.

³⁷T. Śliwiak, *Ostupienie* [Stupefaction], in: idem, *Żywica* [Resin], Warsaw 1964, p. 62:

drzewo które padło
pod uderzeniem topora
nie klęczało
nie zasłaniało się gałęziami
jest żywicy zapach w powietrzu
jest obłupany na ziemi pień
osłupiał.

³⁸Idem, *Oratorium...*, p. 113.

³⁹P. Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate—Discoveries from A Secret World*, Vancouver 2015, p. 80.

⁴⁰H.D. Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, Oxford 1999, p. 38.

ghetto” the axe is *the* weapon. Man learns how to use it better with every tree he cuts down. Another sign of the forest dying is the smell of resin, which is released whenever an axe cuts into a tree.⁴¹ The smell is stronger in places where nature dies. In *Ostupienie* [Stupefaction], Śliwiak writes: “woń żywicy wiedzie / z lasu do tartaku / z tartaku do lasu” [the smell of resin leads / from the forest to the sawmill / from the sawmill to the forest]. This is the way of the cross which the trees have to walk.

Dead nature

Deforestation, about which Tadeusz Śliwiak writes so often in his works, furthers as civilization develops. What man considers to be good and normal is perceived differently by nature:

They bind us together to make rafts
 they float us on a great river
 this is our road to a sawmill hell
 where saws tear our fibers
 and cut our beautiful bodies into pieces
 the wind does not recognize us in the even boards
 our shavings are blown away like withered leaves
 They will strip us of our beauty
 impose their idea of beauty on us
 smooth out our knots
 anoint us with shine⁴²

In the above fragment, there is a strong division into two grammatical categories: they and we. On the one side, there is culture and man. On the other side, there is nature. Nature is appropriated by people who believe that, as Fiedorczyk observes, its only task “[...] is to serve man, because technological progress and the development of capitalism are good in themselves, and nature will find a way to adapt.”⁴³ The trees try to show their own point of view on this subject,

⁴¹In his works, Śliwiak also mentions another tool that is used to cut trees – the saw: “Przyszli / z ramion topory zdjęli / ujeli w ręce swe zębate piły / tą stałą wyostrzoną czynią wiele światła” [They came / took the axes off their shoulders / took their saws into their hands / they make a lot of light with this sharpened steel] (*W środku lasu* [In the middle of the forest] in: T. Śliwiak, *Czytanie mrowiska...* [Reading the anthill], p. 27); “Leżymy powaleni / na suchym mchu lasu / pień olbrzym / i ja / Patrzę na opartą o pień drzewa piłę / pokazuje zęby // Jutro wrócą tu drwale” [Fallen/ we lie on the dry moss/ a giant stump / and me / I look at the saw leaning against the tree trunk / it bares its teeth // Tomorrow the lumberjacks will come back (*Człowiek w lesie* [Man in the woods] in: T. Śliwiak, *Wyspa galerników* [The Island of galley slaves], Kraków 1962, p. 13).

⁴²T. Śliwiak, *Oratorium...*, p. 112–113:
 Wiążą nas w tratwy
 pławią wielką rzeką
 oto jest nasza droga do piekła tartaku
 gdzie piły rozpedzone szarpia nasze włókna
 i tną na sztuki nasze piękne ciała
 w ułożonych deskach wiatr nas nie poznaje
 wióry nasze rozwiewa jak uschnięte liście
 Obedrą nas z urody naszej
 obdarzą swoją wyobraźnią piękna
 wygładzą sęki
 namaszczą świecidlęm.

⁴³J. Fiedorczyk, *Cyborg w ogrodzie...*, p. 41.

explaining to the torturers that they are also living and breathing creatures. Śliwiak recognizes and describes the physiological features of trees:

[...] In a tree
 there is white blood under the sepia of the bark
 accessing it means cutting
 wood-wrenching taut strings

suddenly putting out tomorrow's green⁴⁴

The bark is like skin. Resin is like “white blood.” “Taut strings” of knots are like veins. Each blow with an axe causes severe wounds to the trees, gradually killing them. In *Oratorium*, trees remind us that their respective parts mean something more. Manfred Lurker observes that the branches represent forms and ideas, the outer bark is a symbol of corporeality, geographical spaces are leaves, and stars are flowers; the sap flowing through the tree, on the other hand, contains the essence of divinity.⁴⁵ Cutting trees into pieces not only destroys the forest, changes its original purpose, but also deprives it of its essential symbolic meaning as a whole. Objectified, trees become victims of violence. The actions performed on them are expressive and brutal: trees complain that they are “bound,” “floated,” “torn,” and “cut.”. Their choir does not, as Bachelard would want, “porter haut sa couronne aérienne, son feuillage ailé.”⁴⁶ Instead trees are stripped of their original beauty and turned into boards. Human interference transforms trees beyond recognition – they become new beings, unrecognizable to nature itself. The wind used to be their friend but now it is their foe. The “shavings” are blown away like waste, remnants left by man. For trees the reaction of the wind is a clear sign of their passing, vulnerability, anxiety⁴⁷ – they fully realize the scale of the harm and destruction done to them. The choir of trees also points out that nature and culture differ, especially when it comes to the category of beauty. Man finds aesthetic value mainly in “still/dead nature,” which he helped create. Human skills and creativity overcome the once incomprehensible power of nature. Man interferes in nature and departs “from the animistic and organicist understanding of nature,”⁴⁸ moving towards capitalism. By killing nature, man gains tangible profits. Śliwiak further writes about the devastating nature of human activity thus:

So they will turn flora into four-legged fauna
 of tables and chairs
 we will be used to support the roofs of their houses
 they will build their bridges with us
 they will use us to make whatever they like

⁴⁴T. Śliwiak, ***[Idąc przez śniegi...] [*** Making my way through the snow], in: idem, *Ruchoma przystań* [Moving haven], Kraków 1971, p. 61:

[...] w drzewie
 pod sepią kory jest krew biała
 dostać ją znaczy drzewołomnie
 przecinać struny naprężone
 zielen jutrzejszą gasząc nagle.

⁴⁵M. Lurker, *Der Baum in Glauben und Kunst* ..., p. 147.

⁴⁶G. Bachelard, *La Terre Et Les Rêveries De La Volonté* ..., p. 69.

⁴⁷Por. W. Kopaliński, *Wiatr* [Wind], in: Idem, *Słownik symboli*..., p. 453.

⁴⁸E. Domańska, *Humanistyka ekologiczna* [Environmental humanities], “Teksty Drugie” 2013, no. 1–2, p. 18–19.

from weapons to tools
 from a butcher's log to a violin
 from the pig's trough to the frigate
 And even after death, they will take refuge in us
 and they will make us spread the arms
 of the crosses over their graves⁴⁹

The human being is presented in the poem as the creator of reality. He takes over the divine role of creating the world on his own terms. Human interference radically changes nature: "flora" transforms into "four-legged fauna." The nature of trees changes irreversibly; this transgression is unacceptable to them. Ernst Jünger explains that "im Holz tritt das Bergende und Schützende des Baumes am unverhülltesten hervor."⁵⁰ Therefore, he claims that exploiting the forest to meet human needs is justified. The transformed trees, turned into tables, chairs, roofs, bridges, violins, but also coffins or crosses, etc., as Jünger would say, become an indispensable part of culture and live on even when man dies. It is even a more complex process: the transgression brings out their essence. When something is made of wood, Jünger explains, we see its real life, its "forest and wood spirit," its "forest charm," which even an axe cannot destroy.⁵¹ Śliwiak also appreciates this hidden value of the objects which surround us. He knows that there is more to things, and he wants to understand them. He makes use of all of his senses. The poet interacts with things – he touches them, smells them, looks at them, analyzes them, wishing to discover their original nature:

A tree is more than a memory of it
 a table a boat carved with a spoon
 you can touch it
 you can be read in it
 grains and knots sealed with resin
 you can add a few strings to it and it will sing
 you can use a chisel to find a human face in it⁵²

⁴⁹T. Śliwiak, *Oratorium...*, p. 113:
 I tak z flory wywiodą czworonożną faunę
 stołów i krzeseł
 wesprą nami dachy swoich domów
 zepną w mosty
 będziemy służyć wszystkim ich zachciankom
 od broni do narzędzia
 od rzeźnickiego kłoca do skrzypiec
 od świńskiego koryta do morskiej fregaty
 A i po śmierci będą szukać w nas schronienia
 i jeszcze nam rozkażą nad swymi grobami
 rozkładać ramiona krzyży.

⁵⁰E. Jünger, *Bäume ...*, p. 63.

⁵¹Ibidem.

⁵²T. Śliwiak, *Pamięć* [Memory], in: idem, *Święty wtorek* [Holy Tuesday], Kraków 1968, p. 12:
 Drzewo czymś więcej jest niż pamięć o nim
 stołem jest łodzią wystruganą łyżką
 można go dotknąć
 można w nim odczytać
 słoje i sęki zwężłone żywicą
 można mu dodać kilka strun a śpiewa
 można w nim dętym dociec ludzkiej twarzy.

If you look deep into things made of wood, you can discover the history of trees. It will make you ask questions that the poet asks four times in the poem *Rozdarcia* [Tears] when he watches a furniture exhibition in Kalwaria Zebrzydowska: “Co to za las?” [What is this forest?]. He notices a gap, an empty space, and regretfully replies: “to las co odszedł / w stronę ludzi i chłodnych zwierciadeł” [this forest has gone / towards people and cool mirrors].⁵³ However, when man uses nature to achieve his goals, he tends to err. Not only useful things, but also “weapons” and “a butcher’s log,” used to kill and harm others, are made of trees. As these objects, trees are not only witnesses of dramatic scenes of extermination, but also, against their will, instruments of crime – they are accomplices to the suffering of innocent creatures.

Responsibility for nature

When he writes about the destruction of nature, Tadeusz Śliwiak cannot help but refer to his childhood experiences. He witnessed the death of Jews and animals in a municipal abattoir in Lvov, and thus he describes nature dominated by man as a “forest ghetto.” Nature will be annihilated there. The poet has been significantly traumatized by both genocides: “stoję tu / po wielu przykładach / nie oswoiłem w sobie / mieszkającej śmierci” [I am standing here / after many examples / I have not tamed the death/ that lives in me]⁵⁴, “patrzę w las – widzę drzewo całe w łuskach siekier” [I look into the forest – I can see a tree full of axe scales].⁵⁵ Giving voice to trees, Śliwiak describes the subsequent stages of their life. Man puts an end to their happiness. Instead of using nature wisely, cooperating with it, or supporting it, man devises a plan to transform it from the nature of the first kind into nature of the second, or even third, kind.⁵⁶ Thus, happy mighty trees become the property of man, and their further existence depends on man. Then, they are first skillfully transformed into “even boards” and various objects. On the one hand, they are objects that we use every day and cannot imagine our lives without. On the other hand, they can be used to cause harm, transgressing all moral boundaries. Indeed, trees become their own torturers, as the axe and saw handles are usually made of wood. The poet notices the dramatic effects of human activity: “Dłuższa jest teraz / droga wiewiórki / z drzewa na drzewo / więcej jest teraz nieba / zstępującego w las” [The squirrel’s path / from tree to tree / is now longer / there is more sky / descending into the forest], he writes in *Ostupienie*; “Tu pozostanie / pusty słup powietrza / nie obsiądą go ptaki / i zwierzę się nie otrze” [Here will remain / an empty pillar of air / birds will not sit on it / and no animal will rub against it]; “ustaną korzenie / pień okaleczony / zamknie się w sobie / licząc stygnące słoje” [The roots will cease / trunk crippled / will shut itself off / counting the cooling grains], he predicts in the poem *W środku lasu* [In the middle of

⁵³Idem, *Rozdarcia* [Tears], in: idem, *Widnokres...*, p. 110.

⁵⁴Idem, *Ostupienie...*, p. 62.

⁵⁵Idem, *Igła* [Needle], in: idem, *Dotyk* [Touch], Warsaw 1989, p. 68.

⁵⁶Julia Fiedorczuk explains: “Nature of the second kind is nature that has been processed by humans through farming, irrigation systems, or dams. The concept of nature of the third kind is connected with the development of imaging technology and computer science – it is the nature that has been technologically reproduced. [...] all these concepts, nature of the first, second, and third kind, make sense only in a culture that contrasts the domains of nature and culture, classifying human beings as culture and thus treating all their actions as unnatural.” J. Fiedorczuk, *Cyborg w ogrodzie...*, p. 43–44.

the forest]. Śliwiak believes that people are the main culprits – they are responsible for the crisis of nature. He asks an important question: “czy człowiek zdusi winę w sobie / ofiarą ognia i potrzebą / stołu i łodzi z parą wiosł?” [will man silence the blame in himself / through the sacrifice of fire and the need / for a table and a boat with a pair of oars].⁵⁷ The poet knows that he benefits from culture at the expense of nature and indirectly tortures trees – he knows that he cannot blame the lumberjacks. Indeed, he somehow defends them: “poznałem najwyżej pięciu sześciu drwali / to dobrzy ludzie / nie mam im nic do zarzucenia” [I have met no more than five lumberjacks / they are good people / I have nothing against them].⁵⁸ However, Śliwiak still feels responsible for the natural environment – he believes that he is responsible, and guilty, because he is human. Despite the fact that he “pisze na papierze zaczerpniętym (z nich – K.N.)” [writes on paper taken from them], the choir of trees in *Oratorium* calls the poet “kronikarzem [...] słoju i spękanej kory” [the chronicler [...] of grains and cracked bark], a defender of “poezji lasu” [the poetry of the forest].⁵⁹ By showing the suffering and the terrible effects of the destruction of nature in his poems, Śliwiak wants to give voice to it or speak on its behalf. He tries to alleviate its pain, trying to resolve the conflict between nature and man. On the other hand, when in the volume *Kolczuga* [Hauberk], he writes about “Dantym tartaków” [Dante of sawmills], who sits “na wysokiej górze / usypanej z trocin” [on a high mountain / made of sawdust]⁶⁰ and mourns the forest, it seems that he is writing about himself.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

⁵⁷T. Śliwiak, ***[Idąc przez śniegi...]..., p. 61.

⁵⁸Idem, *Ostupienie...*, p. 62.

⁵⁹Idem, *Oratorium...*, p. 113.

⁶⁰Idem, *Dante*, in: idem, *Kolczuga* [Hauberk], Warsaw 1989, p. 68.

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KEYWORDS

ORATORIUM

nature

i m a g i n a t i o n

ABSTRACT:

This article examines the ecological imagination of the forgotten poet from the 1956 generation, Tadeusz Śliwiak, and his poem *Oratorium* [Oratorio] published in the volume *Widnokres* [Horizon] (1971), in the section entitled *Ziemia* [Earth]. The poet's observations on nature are summarized in this poem. Śliwiak in his poems notes that while nature opens up to man and accepts him, man, feeling his superiority over nature, goes too far and constantly enters into conflicts with it. In the forest, apart from communing with nature, which man wants very much, hunters and lumberjacks interfere with the environment. Though it should be protected and open to all, nature is appropriated by man. The poet believes that people are responsible for the destruction of nature and asks an important question: "czy człowiek zdusi winę w sobie / ofiarą ognia i potrzebą / stołu i łodzi z parą wiosł?" [will man silence the blame in himself / through the sacrifice of fire and the need / for a table and a boat with a pair of oars]. Feeling responsible for the natural environment and believing that he is to blame for its destruction because he is human, Śliwiak tries to save "poezja lasu" [the poetry of the forest]. By showing the suffering and the painful effects of the destruction of nature in his poems, Śliwiak wants to give voice to it or speak on its behalf.

man

ecology

Tadeusz Śliwiak

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