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Fear and Trembling:  
Oscar V. de L. Miłosz's 'La Reine des Serpents' (1930) as a Decadent Fairy Tale<sup>1</sup>

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That which we call reality is not something which offers itself to us, but a fruit of initiation, and initiation commences with love.  
— Oscar V. de L. Miłosz, *L'Amoureuse Initiation* (1910)<sup>2</sup>

The Francophone-Lithuanian writer Oscar V. de L. Miłosz (1877-1939) considered his fairy tale 'La Reine des serpents' ['Queen of Serpents'] so important that he published it twice, in both of his collections of Lithuanian Fairy Tales (1930, 1933).<sup>3</sup> 'La conte si curieux de la "Reine des Serpents"' [The very curious tale of the 'Queen of Serpents'], as he writes in the introduction to the first volume, 'est tout à fait caractéristique [...], et mériterait peut-être d'être rapproché de certaines théories scientifiques modernes relatives à l'origine animale des végétaux' [is quite characteristic [...]] and would perhaps deserve to be compared to certain modern scientific theories relating to the animate origin of plant life.<sup>4</sup> In this article I contextualize and closely read this text, a version of 'Eglė Žalčių Karalienė' ['Eglė, Queen of Serpents'], which is best known as a 'national' folk tale of Lithuania.<sup>5</sup>

Following the author's earlier œuvre, I read the story as a decadent fairy tale, characterized by its tonal ambiguity, exaggerated sexuality, and the problematics of hereditary decline. While Miłosz, as a diplomat, championed the Lithuanian republic, his fairy tale hinges on the excesses of his own legacy among the Polish-Lithuanian aristocracy. Thus, his French literary version of a popular folk tale represents a negotiation of complex shifts in identity and genre.

An important subtype of the animal-bridegroom tales (Aarne-Thompson-Uther Index (ATU) 425), the tale is a 'beauty and the beast' narrative of Eglė,—whose name means 'Spruce' in Lithuanian—a young woman wedded to an animal bridegroom. A serpent (*žilvinas*, or *žaltys*, grass snake), a household diety in the region, appears amongst her clothes after bathing. The serpent's

family forces them to marry, and Eglė raises three children, though she still longs for her home. After she completes three near-impossible tasks, the serpent-husband grants her a visit back to her family. Before she leaves, she teaches her three children an incantation which summons her husband from afar:

O Serpent, serpenteau, serpentelet,  
Si vous êtes vif, l'écume est de lait,  
O Serpentelet, serpenteau, serpent  
Si vous êtes mort, l'écume est de sang.

Oh Serpent, little snake, serpentlet,  
You live, if the foam is milk.  
Oh Serpent, little snake, serpentlet,  
You're dead, if the foam is blood.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, Eglė's relatives come and interrogate her three children, the youngest of whom, Drebulė [Aspen], reveals the charm. The bride's brothers kill the serpent-king. In a final metamorphosis, Eglė transforms into the tree of her name, and she also transforms her four children: Ažuolas [Oak], Uosis [Ash], Beržas [Birch], and Drebulė.

A French-educated descendent of the Polish-speaking Lithuanian gentry, Miłosz took on the role of master for his famous distant cousin from Vilnius, the Nobel-prize winning poet Czesław Miłosz, who in turn became his disciple.<sup>7</sup> The elder Miłosz began as a literary decadent, and turned to promoting the Lithuanian national revival after 1918. The fairy tale collections belong to this transitional period, and draw on the efforts of Lithuanian nationalism, which drew themselves on folklore studies, as well as on discourses of the fairy tale. Miłosz shared the mystical regard for hereditary aristocracy among the French reactionary writers.<sup>8</sup> According to most sources, he was not fully fluent in Lithuanian, and was also separated both by class and work from Lithuania proper. Czesław Miłosz, who grew up in Lithuania, relates these differences at various points in his writings on his cousin.<sup>9</sup> 'Je suis bien dans la peau de Don Quichotte' [I feel very much in the role of Don Quixote], Oscar Miłosz announced on his first visit to Kaunas, then capital of Lithuania, in 1922.<sup>10</sup>

In the second section of this article, I describe the author's background and the writing of fairy tales. Miłosz authored the Lithuanian *contes* through multiple vectors: as a political ambassador for the Lithuanian state, as a descendent of the Polish-speaking Lithuanian gentry, as a French decadent, and as a Catholic mystic. While a patriot for the Lithuanian 'folk', he followed the era of J.-K. Huysmans and Paul Bourget through an inward elevation of the mystical, and a turn toward hierarchy.<sup>11</sup> By reading his version of a narrative prized by the Lithuanian national movement, I point out the ways in which he performs Lithuanian identity as a storyteller, supporting modern Lithuanian nationalism while representing its ancient nobility. This stems from his complex position in France. Miłosz's did not naturalize as a French citizen until 1931, following years of service in foreign affairs.<sup>12</sup> His privileged class position was based on the wealth of his estate, sold to the Soviet Union in 1917. With his Lycée education in Paris and the Louvre, Miłosz contrasted with Lithuanian nationalists, often of a poor or peasant background, who were raised speaking Lithuanian. Yet, thanks to the refined French prose of his fairy tales, Miłosz 'passed' as Lithuanian in the French Empire through a mimetic performance.<sup>13</sup>

In the third section of this article I show how, by composing literary 'versions', Miłosz performs the authenticity of the folk tale for his readership. By writing in French, Miłosz renders the 'Lithuanian Tales' foremost in the style of the French *conte de fées*. On the other hand, he plays with generic aspects and expectations of the folk tale, based on the national Romantic auspices of his collection. The various genres of the fairy tale allow Miłosz to promote a prestigious national narrative while expressing his conception of Lithuanians, based on a linguistic and cultural distance from a Lithuanian national ideal of a peasant culture. His view of a Lithuanian 'race' as 'Aryan' chimed with his esoteric and nationalist interests, and accorded with the political climate of Europe in the 1930s.<sup>14</sup>

While Miłosz repeats the plot of the folk tale in order to promote the revival of Lithuanian nationalism, he represents the animal bridegroom as degenerated nobility, and the fatal incantation as a mythic spell. In line with the French tradition, the serpent husband becomes 'le jeune ophidien'

[the young Ophidian], a decadent savage, and his daughter the initiate of his secret ritual.<sup>15</sup> In his retelling, Miłosz translates the proper names of Eglé's family as hyphenated, choosing the verb 'trembler' to connote the etymology of the youngest daughter's namesake tree, i.e., Drébule-Tremble. This is because in Lithuanian, the name of the tree, Aspen (*Drebule*) relates etymologically to the verb 'to tremble', *drebeti*. The dynamic between the proper name, its species of tree, and the act of trembling, become important for Miłosz in retelling the story of the 'queen of snakes'. In my conclusion, I turn to the decadent poetics of the fairy tale, and suggest reading the trembling of the youngest daughter alongside the author's religious and metaphysical poetry.

Research on Miłosz has mainly focused on this religious and metaphysical poetry, though a number of Lithuanian scholars have researched and translated his fairy tales.<sup>16</sup> In his collections, Miłosz draws on two things hitherto unnoticed: first, he plays with distinctions between folk and fairy tales; second, he draws on a poetics of decadence. I thus read the tale in relation to various fields of decadent studies: French and also Nordic, in order to arrive at a decadence which reflects Miłosz's shifts in style and persona. Just as scholars of Nordic decadence have indicated in their studies, his rural characters also succumb to over-refinement and decline.<sup>17</sup> Let us consider this 'Lithuanian decadence' an act of authorial love for the genre, since in Miłosz's version of the tale, the heroine fulfils the postulate of Vladimir Propp, who claimed that folk tales derive from ancient rites of initiation.<sup>18</sup> First, however, it is worth acquainting readers with the role of decadence in Miłosz's career.

### **From Decadent Poet to Lithuanian Prophet**

Miłosz announced his affiliations with fin-de-siècle decadence at the age of 23, publishing his first book, *Le Poème des Décadences*, in 1899. In his early life, he cultivated the image of a dandy, travelling through Europe and Africa on the inheritance of his aristocratic Polish-speaking nobility. In his first novel, *L'Amoureuse Initiation* [*The Amorous Initiation*] (1910) he parodies the period's attitude of malaise and decline through a depiction of Venice, rotting, and written with a torrid, overflowing

style, reminiscent of Georges Rodenbach's *Bruges-la-morte* (1892). The novel is framed as the encounter of a Danish aristocrat with another high-born decadent, Monsieur de Pinamonte, who retells a doomed love affair with a young woman, Annalenna. Pinamonte, a stand-in for the author, becomes the corrupted double of the young Danish aristocrat, who functions as a stand-in for the reader. Yet, at the same time, his erotic fixation on Annalenna becomes a vehicle for an ever-expanding metaphysical vision of love and Neo-Platonic redemption.

In the second part of his career, Miłosz publicly turned away from the decadence of his early work, though he continued to play the part of an aristocrat and aesthete. In 1910, he formally adopted the noble title *de Lubicz* or *Labunowo*, proof of aristocratic lineage in Poland, and a mark of exoticism among French modernists.<sup>19</sup> He became attracted to the occult, and after a series of religious experiences beginning in 1914, turned to writing metaphysical poetry, drawing on Emmanuel Swedenborg's work and his own readings of the Old Testament (*Épître à Storge*, 1917; *Adramandoni*, 1918; *La Confession de Lemuel*, 1922; *Ars Magna*, 1924; and *Les Arcanes*, 1927). Until this point, Miłosz had depicted his place of birth with a vague nostalgia, associated with the images of a decaying estate in the Grand Duchy – indications of this can be found in the draft of an unfinished novel, *Le Zborowski*.<sup>20</sup> However, following the Russian Revolution of 1917, he sold his parents' estate in Čareja to the Soviet Union and became interested in the Republic of Lithuania, taking up the political cause of the country in 1918.<sup>21</sup>

He occupied a position as *chargé d'affaires* of Lithuania from 1920-25, and even represented Lithuania in the League of Nations in 1921.<sup>22</sup> In this office, Miłosz was obliged to secure international recognition for Lithuania following the events of 1919, when the state fought in a series of independence wars against Bolshevik and Polish forces. In a series of political essays, he wrote about the so-called 'Vilnius question', the dispute over the claimed Lithuanian capital, captured by Poland in 1920.<sup>23</sup> As representative of Lithuania with the League of Nations, Miłosz had been enlisted to broker for Vilnius, but negotiations with Poland were stalled during the interwar period.<sup>24</sup>

In his 1980 Nobel prize speech, Czesław Miłosz describes his debt to his cousin, who he met on a visit to Paris in 1931. He succinctly captures the issue of his complex identity, describing him as ‘a French poet’ but one whose work ‘could be elucidated by the intricate story of a family as well as of a country once called the Grand Duchy of Lithuania’.<sup>25</sup> In his longer narrative accounts, such as the *Land of Ulro* (1977), the younger Miłosz describes his cousin’s choice of diplomatic service as a means of atoning for his former egoistic solitude’, by which we are presumably to understand his ‘decadence’.<sup>26</sup> The ‘intricate story’ alludes to the ethnic diversity of the Grand Duchy, in which Oscar was born to a Jewish mother and Polish-Belorussian father, under the aegis of the Polish nobility. The ambiguities of his ethnic identity in twentieth-century France could thus be concealed by an exotic title, though in practice ‘he never rejected his inheritance of mixed blood’.<sup>27</sup> Thus, while Oscar Miłosz appealed to a French reading audience, he remained useful for Lithuanian elites who were trying to establish independence from Russia.

Threads of decadence – a concern with hereditary aristocracy, a melancholic relation to the modern, and apparently ‘perverse’ sexuality – continue through the third part of his career, when Miłosz remade himself into a Lithuanian patriot and Catholic prophet. Following the publication of an edition of his collected poems in 1929 (*Poèmes 1895-1927*), he ceased writing poetry (save for the fragment *Psaume de l’Étoile du matin* [Psalm of the Morning Star], 1936) and turned to works on Lithuanian folklore and nationality. As recent scholarship has shown, the status of ‘Lithuanian’ had a prestige in French letters which counted on an idealized perception of a people supposed to be more primitive. For the French, Lithuania represented a land preserved from western civilization and modernization, an idyllic Eden. Yet for many Lithuanians, by contrast, Paris drew fascination and repulsion as a contemporary Babylon.<sup>28</sup> Miłosz could remain sophisticated and profound, while through his Lithuanian identity he could indulge his audience with a pantheistic aura, imbued with the elemental forces that contrasted with the positivism and mechanical conception of life in modern Paris.<sup>29</sup>

The ambiguities of his adopted Lithuanian identity and his refined French style drive the more decadent tendencies of Miłosz's later work, which is the subject of this article.<sup>30</sup> In the 1930s, his two volumes of fairy tales were published in French with the publisher J. O. Fourcade. The first, *Contes et fabliaux de la vieille Lithuanie* [*Stories and Fables of Old Lithuania*] came out in 1930 and the second, *Contes lituaniens de ma Mère l'Oye* [*Lithuanian Tales of Mother Goose*] in 1933. These are published in his collected writings along with the 1936 essay *Les Origines de la nation lituanienne* [*Origins of the Lithuanian Nation*], in which he conceptualizes the Lithuanians as a nation and race based on racial theories (phrenology, physiognomy) and nineteenth-century Romantic views on language.<sup>31</sup> Thus, Miłosz asserts that Lithuanian culture belongs to a declining race, but he does this through a French conception of the fairy-tale genre, in what he describes in one letter as pantomimes.<sup>32</sup>

He drew on personal history for inspiration. As mentioned above, he was a descendent of the Polish-speaking Lithuanian gentry who had ruled the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth as a confederal state since the sixteenth century, until the Polish Partitions (1772 to 1795), in which Austria, Prussia, and Imperial Russia divided the territory. Following this dissolution, the Lithuanian gentry was obliged to either comply with the Tsarist system, forge a union with Polish leaders, or disappear off the map. At same time, a new national consciousness arose which emphasized the folk culture and language of ethnic Lithuanians, but also included the culture of the gentry.<sup>33</sup> During a series of uprisings (1830-1831; 1863-1864) Lithuanian factions fought with Poles against the repressive regime, and the national movement gained traction despite Russification and a press-ban (1864-1904) on Lithuanian literature.

The aspirations of the incipient Polish and Lithuanian national movements did not align with the details of this prior multi-ethnic history. The Polish-speaking Lithuanian gentry distinguished themselves from the Poles in their allegiance to Lithuania but had to affiliate with a state based on the Lithuanian language. Because this national movement celebrated the history of mediaeval Lithuania, and integrated the culture of the gentry more broadly, Miłosz could claim



this identity as well, such as the heritage of the marriage of the Polish queen Jadwiga to the Grand Duke of Lithuania in the fourteenth century.<sup>34</sup>

### **The Right of the Strongest**

Where Miłosz's language and style relate to a French classical tradition of an earlier period – in particular the writers of the eighteenth century – his Lithuanian *contes* are based on research on the folk tale, which was first recognized as a genre in the nineteenth century with the research of philologists such as the Brothers Grimm in 1831.<sup>35</sup> Scholars have long debated the distinction between the fairy tale and the folk tale; where literary scholars emphasize the historic role of textual examples and editorship of fairy tales, folklorists insist on an oral tradition of storytelling distinct from written tales.<sup>36</sup> Miłosz presents readers with 'authentic' folk tales, but performs a storytelling role as a French writer in the fairy tale tradition. He neither merely translates the tales – recreating them in French – nor transcribes an oral performance, but presents readers with 'versions', which belong to the Lithuanian oral tradition.<sup>37</sup>

In the introduction to the first book of fairy tales in 1930, Miłosz compares himself to Charles Perrault and uses the French writer's frequent asides, his moral and philosophical questions, with which he intervenes in the plot of his tales.<sup>38</sup> By introducing and commenting on his 'versions' of Lithuanian peasant tales, he repeats the French upper-class appropriation of oral tales, traceable to the aristocratic salons of the seventeenth century.<sup>39</sup> Storytellers such as Madame D'Aulnoy – who coined the term *contes de fées*, or 'fairy tales' as we know the literary genre in English – retold oral tales with literary wit, publishing them for learned French audiences.<sup>40</sup> The 'Mère L'Oye' of the second volume, *Contes lithauniens de ma Mère l'Oye*, directly refers to the largely literary 'Mother Goose' tradition, which has no correlate in the Lithuanian folk tale.

Yet, Miłosz contends in the same introduction that the Lithuanian oral tradition furthers the secrets of esoteric religion.<sup>41</sup> By ascribing the rural peasants the status of an ancient race, Miłosz translates the folk material as having a mystic, aristocratic heritage. The decline of the

Lithuanians occurs both in his characterization and in his literary ‘performance’. In ‘La Reine des serpents’, he contrasts his refined language with aspects of oral storytelling, such as asides and declarations, and when he describes the murder of the serpent-husband, he switches to the present tense: ‘Le Serpent sort sa belle tête de l’eau, nage à perdre haleine...Le voilà sur la sable... Les Douze solides gaillards se jettent sur leur beau-frère et l’assomment’ [the Serpent lifts its beautiful head from the water, swimming until out of breath...here he is on the sand... The twelve thugs throw themselves on their brother-in-law and knock him out].<sup>42</sup> Though beastly, the serpent husband possesses the refined charms, as Miłosz saw them, of the Lithuanian race. His brothers-in-law further the downfall of his mystic inheritance, taking revenge on the patriarch of the serpent clan. That a collection of fairy tales might indicate the spirit of a nation was posited by the Grimm Brothers’ collection of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* [*Children’s and Household Tales*] (1812-1815). The Grimms’ work inspired the collection and documentation of oral traditions throughout Europe, including the Lithuanian one.<sup>43</sup> For the Grimms, the folktale (German, *das Märchen*) was a relic of the ancient past, a collective product of the knowledge of the people of common folklore (*Volkskunde*). As part of their political advocacy for a unified Germany, they also attributed folktales to an emergent unified people (*das Volk*).<sup>44</sup> Even early scholars, such as the Grimms’ editors Johannes Bolte and Georg Polívka, were quick to note the insufficiency of these claims; for instance, some of the tales had literary sources, while others came from French-Huguenot informants.<sup>45</sup>

*Kinder- und Hausmärchen* helped to refashion the folk tale in Europe from adult entertainment to an instructional genre for children. Miłosz satirizes this change through violence and exaggeration, something often associated with Leon Blóy and the reactionary revival, of which we might consider Miłosz a fellow traveller.<sup>46</sup> When the family of the serpent-husband interrogates the heroine’s children, three of the children react with discretion:

Mais il en alla tout autrement avec la fille, Drébulé, qui, pleine de vaillance au début de l’interrogatoire, fut saisie d’un tremblement violent à l’apparition des verges qui lui étaient

destinées; et, l'instant d'après, elle révélait jusqu'à la dernière syllabe de l'incantation pour échapper au supplice.'

[But things were quite different with the youngest daughter, Drébulé, who, full of valour at the beginning of her interrogation, was seized by violent tremors at the apparition of the rods intended for her; and, following this, she repeated the entire incantation to escape punishment.]<sup>47</sup>

Milosz narrates the threats of her father's family with a phallic connotation, suggesting sexual violence. Though he exaggerates this part of the traditional oral version of the tale, Milosz establishes a correspondence with the forced marriage of Eglé earlier in the story. This sharpens the tragic plot of a daughter who 'trembles' at the shared fate of her mother.

By writing a collection of Lithuanian fairy tales, Milosz involves himself in the 'rural' current of national Romanticism.<sup>48</sup> In the introduction he invokes the oral variants from the collection of the editor and nationalist Jonas Basanavičius (1851-1927).<sup>49</sup> During the 1880s, Basanavičius edited the newspaper *Aušra* [*Dawn*] and later he organized the conference, or Saima, of Vilnius in 1905, helping to formulate the first programme of an independent Lithuania. Along with his brother Tomas, Basanavičius collected, studied, and published on folklore. The collection *Lietuviškos pasakos* [*Lithuanian Fairy Tales*] (1898-1902) contains translated textual sources and recorded oral stories sourced from informants throughout Lithuania, and remains the cornerstone of studies on the Lithuanian folktale. Like the Grimm Brothers, he believed that folk tales contained memories of ancient eras and constituted myths particular to a nation.<sup>50</sup>

In his collection, Basanavičius includes two versions of 'Eglé, Queen of Serpents', though there are others in the Lithuanian repertoire.<sup>51</sup> The tale has been well researched, and scholars debate how much it conveys about folklore, mythology, and literature.<sup>52</sup> Some argue that it stems from ancient traditions in India, while others have explored its links with mythological legends and rituals preserved from Lithuanian antiquity.<sup>53</sup> At the comparative level, tales of the animal-bridegroom, particularly where the husband is a snake, abound throughout the Baltic region, including in Estonian and Finnish literary and oral traditions. This has a likely relation to local taboos and snake cults in the Baltics, where snakes were household deities and ambivalent psycho-

pomps in narrative traditions.<sup>54</sup> Yet, the plot of a search for the lost husband and the motif of the animal husband have known literary precedents (or examples of the opposite, such as in John Keats's *Lamia* (1820), such as Apuleius' 'Amor and Psyche', which later transformed in the French tradition into 'Beauty and the Beast'.<sup>55</sup>

Guntis Pakalns has noted an 1837 print publication in the Polish paper *Biruta* as the earliest written version of the famous folk tale. Pakalns points this out as the variation that merges the animal-bridegroom plot with the final transformation of the daughters into trees – an object of speculation among folklorists. Theorizing a literary origin for the particular version of the tale, he ascribes its popularity to the compelling story (the tragic ending of a mother separated from her children) and its historicity within twentieth-century Lithuanian nationalism (the possibility of a textual origin for the Baltic folk tale as a national allegory adds a telling irony to Miłosz's version).<sup>56</sup> After the press ban on the Lithuanian language, the story became popular through children's books.<sup>57</sup> Even during Soviet Occupation, the fairy tale endured in the national canon through a popular verse version by Salomėja Neris (1940). I mention these examples as context for Miłosz's version, which both belong to the national canon and exist outside of it. For instance, the author partially invites an allegorical reading as the drama of the Lithuanian nation. For example, by invoking two 'councils' at crucial moments of the plot (first among the serpent elders who fail to negotiate for Eglė, and the second among her relatives, before killing the serpent husband), he evokes world affairs, namely the failure of the United Nations to negotiate on behalf of Lithuania and Poland over the question of Vilnius, discussed above.

The temporality of the fairy tale also crosses cultural contexts. While the majority of the authors' Lithuanian fairy tales take place during the period of the Grand Duchy, 'La Reine des serpents' takes place in mythic time. It begins once upon a time '...dans la nuit des temps' [...in the night of time] and ends in the present day, when 'malgré tant et tant de millénaires écoulés' [millenia after millenia have passed unnumbered] since the transformation of Eglė and her daughters.<sup>58</sup> This mythological sense of time allows Miłosz to inscribe a number of conceptual

moves based on the problem of ethnicity.<sup>59</sup> As the story of an exogamous marriage of a young woman, the folk tale had already expressed the issue of ethnic difference in the historically diverse setting of the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth. In the French version, the animal-bridegroom bears the hereditary nobility of the ancient Lithuanian race. Yet, his sexual aggression stems from the animalistic nature of the ‘serpents’, the ‘others’ with whom the human heroine has children. By paying for the transgression of the youngest, they are transformed into the landscape, thereby naturalizing the Lithuanian nation.

Miłosz understood this ‘nation’ through racial categories. Pauline Moret-Jankus describes how Miłosz conceived of Lithuanians in various ways during his career, due largely to his political affiliations and his place in the French Empire. At the beginning of his career, he presented the view that, in the context of the Grand Duchy, Lithuanians were effectively identical with the Polish-speaking nobility, as seen in his unfinished 1913 novel *Les Zborowski*. However, this changed in 1918 when the Lithuanian national movement struggled to claim Vilnius. Miłosz then strategically differentiated an independent Lithuania from ‘Slavic’ Poland and asserted that the Lithuanian people are the divine Aryan heirs to the capital. After 1936, he moved away from this Aryan conception towards a more messianic one, in which Lithuanians belonged to the so-called Iberian race alongside Jewish peoples.<sup>60</sup> The fairy tales belong to the second period, during which Miłosz subscribes to the racist ideas of leading Indo-European theorists, and asserts – largely based on his understanding of philology – that Lithuanians and Latvians belong to the Aryan race.<sup>61</sup>

An important source for Miłosz was the racist linguistic typology of Friedrich Schlegel, who argued that ancient Indo-European languages had an inherently divine origin, but had degenerated over time. In his evaluation of Lithuanian, an Indo-European language, Miłosz adopted the analogy between biology and language that was common in Romantic philology. Throughout the Lithuanian tales, he draws parallels between Hindu and Greek mythology, presenting Lithuanians as learned aristocrats rather than apparently primitive peasants.<sup>62</sup> However,

when writing in French during the Third Republic, Miłosz describes the ‘brutal fact’ of the serpents returning for Eglé:

‘Mais la marée montante des siffleurs battait maintenant les portes et les fenêtres et, en fin de compte, il fallut accepter la fait brutal et s’incliner devant le droit du plus fort. Le oui fatal ne fut pas plus tôt prononcé, que les serpents, s’emparant d’Eglé, se pressaient comme un torrent vers la sortie.’

Yet the rising tide of those hissing pounded continually against the windows and doors, and, in the end, it was necessary to accept the brutal fact and bow down to the right of the strongest. The fatal ‘yes’ had just been pronounced when the serpents, seizing Eglé, pressed like a torrent to the exit.<sup>63</sup>

By conquering the young woman by force, the serpents mirror the attitudes of fascist and extreme nationalist parties in the early 1930s. A strong ethno-nationalism developed in the Baltics during the 1920s, fostering an authoritarian regime in Lithuania under Antanas Smetona in 1926 and in Estonia and Latvia in 1934. Like Western Europe, the Baltic states were also interested in establishing a nation in biological terms, with the aim of both homogenizing and creating a racial state.<sup>64</sup> As with his depiction of the serpent-husband, Miłosz combined the reactionary ideal of submission to a hereditary monarchy with the Romantic ‘other’ of a Dionysian image, doing so through the Lithuanian national movement.

To the Francophone reader, the ‘Young Ophidian’ is an ‘other’, a hybrid of nobility and pagan brutality. Although the serpent-husband belongs to the animistic world of paganism, Miłosz characterizes him as an aristocrat from a noble family. When snuck into the heroine’s tunic, he appears ‘indiscret comme un vrai petit homme,’ [‘indiscreet as a real little man’], though later returns as a ‘un charmant cavalier, [a charming cavalier]’ who tips his hat.<sup>65</sup> In this way, one can read the animal-bridegroom as a sort of Don Juan figure, similar to the hero of the author’s mystery play *Miguel Mañara* from 1913. For Miłosz, the romance of the Don Juan figure was not only an aesthetic choice, but also a form of penitence in an act of divine love. This is the dimension of Miłosz’s thought with which I will conclude this article.<sup>66</sup>

## Conclusion: Fear and Trembling

As I have discussed, Miłosz's racial politics and literary decadence complicate any straightforward interpretation of the fairy tale as an allegory for the nation. As a literary tale, 'La Reine des serpents' highlights the tragic correspondence between the fate of the mother and the youngest daughter, both of whom submit to the 'right of the strongest' – for Eglè, the invading serpents; for Aspen-Drébulé, her own family. Miłosz translates the etiological proper name from the Lithuanian folk tale into a French name, and also repeats the action in the final line of the tale, where we 'voyez, elle tremble, hélas, elle tremble et tremble et tremble et tremble' [watch, alas, how she trembles, and trembles, and trembles].<sup>67</sup>

This final act has a religious significance when the transgression is read alongside the Biblical example in Miłosz's metaphysical poem, *Les Arcanes* [Poem of the Arcana] (1927). The youngest daughter submits in a teleological suspension of the ethical, as Søren Kierkegaard describes in *Frygt og Bæven* [*Fear and Trembling*] (1843), though she is closer to Isaac, the son sacrificed, than the patriarch Abraham.<sup>68</sup> As the offspring of the symbol for racial difference (the serpent-husband), the youngest daughter constitutes the figure of a woman as either consumed for speculation or discarded.<sup>69</sup> If Eglè resembles Annalenna and the *femmes fragiles* of the author's early work, then Aspen-Drébulé may be compared to the mystic ideal of the feminine in his religious poetry. The 'trembling' of the youngest daughter can be compared with a concept in Miłosz's esotericism, *le nom sacré*, the concept of a name shared between the conjugal pair of Adam and Eve, an incantation which contains the emptiness of space itself.

In her psychoanalytic study of Miłosz, Yolanda Vaičaitis interprets the idealization of the feminine as a consequence of narcissism: the 'lost object' of the mother in early childhood is internalised as a form of mourning.<sup>70</sup> In *Les Arcanes*, femininity becomes a means for *manifestatio*, the elucidation or clarification of faith by analogical reason.<sup>71</sup> In the poem, which is a morality play set in the ruins of Reims Cathedral, after it was ransacked by the Goths in the thirteenth century, Miłosz describes 'feminine manifestation' as a symbol of nature itself and of immaculate conception. In the final part of the poem, Eve questions Adam, asking 'Adam, être de mon amour,

n'est-il pas vrai que le seul rien te sépare de Dieu? [‘Adam, being of my love, is it not true that only nothing separates you from God?’]<sup>72</sup> The universal man, Adam, possesses pre-eminence over Eve due to his ‘secret’ right to utter the sacred name of Nothingness.<sup>73</sup> However, in the folk tale, it is the daughter’s own voice that betrays her when she pronounces the incantation passed on by her mother.

In the fairy tale, Miłosz proposes absolute faith for the daughter, yet her ‘trembling’ is caused by the sexual aggression of the dominant group (or ‘race’). Like other decadent writers, Miłosz grounds his anti-feminism in his response to modernity and his Gnostic Catholicism. He reinforces the secondary or derivative status of women in his metaphysics to stabilize a relativistic universe during a period of increasing security concerns in Europe.<sup>74</sup> In his translation of the auto-commentary on ‘the name of the sacred nothing’, Miłosz draws parallels with the fairy tale:

Malheureusement, Eve, la nature physique, est là, avec sur ses lèvres le frémissement du mot soufflé par les anges déchus, les ennemis de ce Rien incompréhensible où devait s’accomplir le Sacrifice initial. Ce mot, elle l’entend dans le sifflement de la créature dont le corps se confond avec la terre, dont le regard semble sortir du sable, dont la soudaine immobilité de pierre est comme l’empreinte du Rien impénétrable, source de toutes les curiosités sacrilèges et de tous les maux que en résultent

[Unfortunately, Eve, physical nature, is there, and on her lips trembles a word whispered by the fallen angels, the enemies of this incomprehensible Nothing where the initial Sacrifice had to be fulfilled. She hears this word in the hiss of the creature whose body blends with the earth whose stare seems to come from the sand, whose sudden stone-like immobility resembles the imprint of the impenetrable Nothing, source of all sacrilegious curiosity and of all the evils that result from it].<sup>75</sup>

Where mystic poetry universalizes the linguistic role of the Nothing, the Lithuanian folk tale bears the signature of a proper name, one seemingly aligned with biology and a degenerate ‘race’, embodied in the serpent. The poem of *Les Arcanes* ends with Adam’s blindness, in relation to his question ‘Where is space?’ [Où est l’espace?].<sup>76</sup> Lithuania and its mythical time of origin seems to answer: in the mirror of the other Eves, Eglė and her daughters, who are subjected to the founding of this ‘nation’ in an ethnic time. The ‘trembling’ name of the daughter spells her enforcement into heredity, and the mythology of blood.<sup>77</sup>



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<sup>2</sup> O. V. de L. Milosz, *Amorous Initiation: A Novel of Sacred and Profane Love: An Excerpt from the Memoirs of the Chevalier Waldemar de L--* (Inner Traditions, 1994), p. 120.

<sup>3</sup> O. V. de L. Milosz, *Œuvres Complètes*, 11 vols (Éditions A. Silvaire, 1963), ix, pp. 144.

<sup>4</sup> O. V. de L. Milosz, *Contes et fabliaux de la vieille Lithuanie* (Éditions J. O. Fourcade, 1930), p. 6. All translations from french are the author's, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>5</sup> Throughout this text, I use the Lithuanian formal name Eglė, rather than the French transcription (Eglé) to refer to the protagonist of both the folk tale and the fairy tale.

<sup>6</sup> Milosz, *Contes et fabliaux de la vieille Lithuanie* (Éditions J.-O. Fourcade, 1930), p. 128.

<sup>7</sup> Andrzej Franaszek, *Milosz: A Biography* (Belknap Press, 2017), pp. 230.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Paul Bourget's *L'Émigré* (1907), and Émile Baumann's *La Fosse aux Lions* (1911).

<sup>9</sup> Czesław Milosz, *Second Space: New Poems*, trans. by Robert Hass (Ecco, 2004). For more on the relationship, see Franaszek's biography of Milosz.

<sup>10</sup> See Genovaitė Dručkutė, 'Un Voyage D'Oscar Milosz En Lituanie: Tentative de Retrouvailles', *Literatūra*, 60.4 (2018), pp. 26-33.

<sup>11</sup> See Richard Griffiths, *The Reactionary Revolution: The Catholic Revival in French Literature: 1870-1914* (F. Ungar, 1965).

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Buges, *Milosz: En Quête du Divin* (Librarie Nizet, 1963), p. 281.

<sup>13</sup> Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (Routledge, 2013), p. 65.

<sup>14</sup> Pauline Moret-Jankus, 'The Aesthetics of Race in Oscar V. de L. Milosz: Mysticism and Politics', in *Race Theory and Literature: Dissemination, Criticism, Intersections*, ed. by Pauline Moret-Jankus and Adam J. Toth (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019), pp. 50-69.

<sup>15</sup> O. V. de L. Milosz, *Contes et fabliaux de la vieille Lithuanie* (Éditions J.-O. Fourcade, 1930), p. 122.

<sup>16</sup> The standard biography is Jacques Buge, *Milosz: En Quête du divin* (Librarie Nizet, 1963). For Lithuanian sources see Elina Naujokaitienė, *Oskaras Milašius: Mistikas ir Hermetinas Poetas* (VDU Leidykla, 2001) and for the translation of fairy tales see O. V. de L. Milosz, *Lietuviškos pasakos*, trans. by Valdas Petrauskas (Vyturys, 1989).

<sup>17</sup> Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Riikka Rossi, Viola Parente-Čapková and Mirjam Hinrikus, eds, *Nordic Literature of Decadence* (Routledge, 2020). On rural decadence, see pp. 24-27.

<sup>18</sup> Vladimir Propp, *Theory and History of Folklore* (University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 199-200.

<sup>19</sup> Czesław Milosz, *The Land of Ulro* (Farrar Straus, Giroux, 1984), p. 352.

<sup>20</sup> In this work, Milosz depicts the decline of the Polish-Lithuanian aristocracy, yet associates them more generally with Slavic culture. This conception changes after the First World War.

<sup>21</sup> Buges, *Milosz*, pp. 290-92.

<sup>22</sup> Dručkutė, 'Un Voyage D'Oscar Milosz En Lituanie', pp. 26-33.

<sup>23</sup> Buges, *Milosz*, pp. 291-92.

Milosz's apocalyptic political writings from the 1930s were published in volume VII of *Soixante-quinze lettres inédites et sept documents originaux* (A. Silvaire, 1969), and his essays, along with the long essay 'Deux messianismes politiques', in volume XIII. These have also been translated into Lithuanian.

<sup>24</sup> Zigmantas Kiaupa, *The History of Lithuania* (Baltos lankos, 2004), pp. 169-75. The city of his birth, now in present day Belarus, was occupied by Soviet Russia during the First World War.

<sup>25</sup> Czesław Milosz, 'The Nobel Prize Lecture', Nobel Prize Outreach 2025, <<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1980/Milosz/lecture/>> [accessed 5 January 2026].

<sup>26</sup> Milosz, *The Land of Ulro*, p. 73

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>28</sup> See Irena Buckley and Marie-France David-de Palacio, *L'Eden lituanien et la Babylone française: Les Contacts culturels franco-lituanien au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Classiques Garnier, 2012).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 278.

<sup>30</sup> Lithuanian identity, or if we are to believe Czesław Milosz, a Polish-Lithuanian identity.

<sup>31</sup> These belonged to a series on the Lithuanian race and identity, 'Notre mère l'iberei, Les origines iberiques du peuple juif' (1932) and 'Les Origines de la nation lituanienne' (1939).

<sup>32</sup> O. V. de L. Milosz, *Soixante-quinze lettres inédites et sept documents originaux* (A. Silvaire, 1969).

Milosz likely became attracted to Aryan theories through the trend of occultism among literary circles in Paris. Being half-Jewish on his mother's side, and aware of the mounting political pressures prior to the Second World War, he would not have been sympathetic to Nazism. See Genevieve-Irene Židonis, *O. V. de L. Milosz: Sa vie, son œuvre, son rayonnement* (Olivier Perrin, 1951), pp 51-57.

<sup>33</sup> Kiaupa, *The History of Lithuania*, pp. 169-75.

<sup>34</sup> Oskaras Milašius, *Lituanistinė ir politinė publicistika* (Lieutuvų Literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2013), pp. 5-10.

- <sup>35</sup> Ruth B. Bottigheimer, 'Fairy-Tale Origins, Fairy-Tale Dissemination, and Folk Narrative Theory', *Fabula*, 47.3-4 (2006), pp. 211-21.
- <sup>36</sup> The relationship between the folk tale and fairy tale differs in Eastern European discourse, where literary fairy tales are often written with the folk tale plot as its basis. See Aija Janelisina-Priedite, *Als die Bäume sprechen konnten: Zur Funktion des Bildes in Karlis Skalbes Märchen: ein Beitrag zum europäischen Kunstmärchen* (Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis, 1987). In the 2010s, folklorist Dan Ben Hamon and classical scholar Jan Ziolkowski refuted a thesis put forward by Ruth Bottigheimer, positing the literary roots of the fairy-tale genre in the work of the Italian writer, Giovanni Straparola. As the Finnish scholar Satu Apo summarizes the debate, 'populists' favour the romantic conception of the folk tale, similar to the Grimms, while 'elitists' emphasize the role of upper-class authors. See *Ihmesatujen historia: Näkökulmia kirjailijoiden, kansankertojen ja tutkijoiden traditioon* (Suomen kirjallisuuden seura, 2018).
- <sup>37</sup> Milosz, *Contes lituaniens*, p. 4.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>39</sup> Some fairy tales in the two collections even satirize the anxiety of the aristocracy, such as the Bluebeard tyrant in 'L'Empereur Jeans-Sans-Ame'. See Milosz, *Oeuvres complètes*, pp. 86-109.
- <sup>40</sup> Jadvyga Krūminienė, 'Oscar Milosz as Translator: Playing Games with Memory', *Respectus philologicus*, 17.22 (2010), pp. 55-66.
- <sup>41</sup> Milosz made use of Baltic mythology in his arguments for the Lithuanian race, including the cults of the sun: Moret-Jankus writes that 'Lithunians, purest sons of a primitive, ruling race, are simply claiming their due. More than independence, this is the Aryan resurrection' ('The Aesthetics of Race in Oscar V. de L. Milosz: Mysticism and Politics', p. 66).
- <sup>42</sup> Milosz, *Oeuvres complètes*, p. 133.
- <sup>43</sup> Jūratė Šlekonytė, *A Hundred Years of Lithuanian Folktale Research: from the Traditional Comparativism to the Modern Methods* (Tautosakos darbai XLIX, 2015), pp. 123-44.
- <sup>44</sup> Jakob Norberg, *The Brothers Grimm and the Making of German Nationalism* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).
- <sup>45</sup> The literary editorship and partial authorship of the Grimms have been extensively studied. See James McGlathery, *Grimms' Fairy Tales: A History of Criticism on a Popular Classic* (Camden House, 1993).
- <sup>46</sup> Griffiths, *The Reactionary Revolution*, p. 92.
- <sup>47</sup> Milosz, *Oeuvres complètes*, pp. 132-33.
- <sup>48</sup> Here I have in mind the idealization of the peasant folk among the Grimms and other Romantics. For a recent study, see Norberg, *The Brothers Grimm and the Making of German Nationalism*.
- <sup>49</sup> Loreta Gustainienė, 'Siųžeto modernizacija Oskaro Milašiaus literatūrinėse pasakose', *Česlovo Milošo skaityma*, 4 (2011), pp. 168-74.
- <sup>50</sup> See Šlekonytė, *A Hundred Years of Lithuanian Folktale Research*.
- <sup>51</sup> Bronislova Kerbelytė, *Lietuvių liaudies pasakų repertuaras* (Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2002).
- <sup>52</sup> Leonardas Sauka and Eugenius Žmuida, *Pasaka 'Eglė žaliūnė karalienė'*, vol. 4 (Lietuvių Literatūros ir Tautosakos Instituta, 2007-2008). pp. 5-11.
- <sup>53</sup> Ada Martinkus, *Eglė, la reine des serpents: un conte lituanien* (Mémoires de l'Institut d'ethnologie, 1989). p. 280.
- <sup>54</sup> Ivonne Lüvena, 'Spruce – the Bride of the Grass Snake: The Folk Tale about *The Grass Snake* as a Story of Baltic Identity', *Scientific Papers of the University of Latvia*, 732 (2008), pp. 11-29.
- <sup>55</sup> Catherine Connors, 'Stories Old Women Tell: Metamorphoses of Psyche in Apuleius and in d'Aulnoy, Villeneuve, and Graffigny', Unpublished Manuscript, Author's Collection, 2023. The narration by an enslaved person recurs with the story-type consistently through the French tradition.
- <sup>56</sup> Guntis Pakalns. 'Pasaka Zalkša ligava Eiropas pasaku kontekstā: The Tale of the Snake's Bride in the Context of the European Tale', *Raiņa un Aspazijas vasarnīca*, 2024 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bGwUxcgDuL0>> [accessed 5 January 2026].
- <sup>57</sup> Popular children's books of fairy tales often begin with the tale, and twentieth-century poets such as Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas, Jonas Aistis, and others, favoured the theme. The Lithuanian Literature and Folklore Institution has published a seven-volume edition of research on the folk tale, its variations, and use in popular literature. See Leonardas Sauka, ed., *Pasaka Eglė Zaliūnė Karalienė* (Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2007-2008).
- <sup>58</sup> Milosz, *Oeuvres complètes*, pp. 126 & 134.
- <sup>59</sup> Hortense J. Spillers writes that "Ethnicity" perceived as mythical time enables a writer to perform a variety of conceptual moves all at once. Under its hegemony, the human body becomes a defenceless target for rape and veneration, and the body, in its material and abstract phase, a resource for metaphor. See 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book', *Diacritics* 17.2 (1987), pp. 65-81 (p. 66).
- <sup>60</sup> In the 1932 paper, 'Les Origines ibérique du peuple Juif', he argues on largely linguistic grounds that the Jewish people are also descended from Iberians. See Genovaitė Dručkutė, ed., *Oskaras Milašius. Lituaništinė ir politinė publicistika* (Lietuvių Literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2013), p. 10.
- <sup>61</sup> Jean-Paul Demoule, *The Indo-Europeans: Archaeology, Language, Race and the Search for the Origins of the West*, trans. by Rohda Cronin-Allenie (Oxford University Press, 2023).
- <sup>62</sup> Krūminienė, 'Oscar Milosz as Translator: Playing Games with Memory', p. 59.
- <sup>63</sup> Milosz, *Oeuvres complètes*, p. 122.

- <sup>64</sup> See Bjö Felder and Paul Weindling, *Baltic Eugenics: Bio-Politics, Race and Nation in Interwar Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania 1918-1940* (Rodopi, 2013).
- <sup>65</sup> Miłosz, *Œuvres complètes*, p. 123.
- <sup>66</sup> See Armand Godoy, 'Le Donjuanisme Dans L'Œuvre de Miłosz' in *O. V. de L. Miłosz: Collections Les Lettres* (Editions A. Silvaire, 1959).
- <sup>67</sup> Miłosz, *Contes lituaniens*, pp. 121, 129.
- <sup>68</sup> See Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling: Repetition*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton University Press, 1983).
- <sup>69</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. by Gillian Gill (Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 228.
- <sup>70</sup> Yolanda Vaičaitis, *Essai de lecture psychoanalytique de l'œuvre de O. V. de L. Miłosz* (Peter Lang, 1980), p. 69.
- <sup>71</sup> O. V. de Miłosz, *The Noble Traveller: O. V. de Miłosz*, trans. by Czesław Miłosz (Inner Traditions, Lindisfarne Press, 1985), p. 352.
- <sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 391.
- <sup>73</sup> O. V. de L. Miłosz, *Les Arcanes* (Paris, Collection des Floriges, 1927), p. 144.
- <sup>74</sup> Before his death in 1939, Miłosz followed current events in Europe with grave concern, penning a Biblical commentary predicting military conflict with *La Clef de l'Apocalypse* (1938).
- <sup>75</sup> Miłosz, *The Noble Traveller*, p. 351. See also O. V. de L. Miłosz, *Les Arcanes* (Paris, Collection des Floriges, 1927).
- <sup>76</sup> Dian Fuss, *Identification Papers* (Routledge, 1995), p. 123. Miłosz, *Les Arcanes* (Paris, Collection des Floriges, 1927), p. 47.
- <sup>77</sup> See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, I, trans. by Robert Hurley (Pantheon Books, 1978).