

WHAT MATTERS MOST: Czeslaw Milosz, Selected Poems: 1931-2004 (Ecco/Harper Collins, 2006)

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Czeslaw Milosz took a long, thoughtful pause midway through a reading he gave in December 1975 at the Guggenheim. The audience rustled their programs and shifted in their seats. Perhaps it was the prodding irony of a line from the poem he had just read that prompted him to stop for a moment. "People therefore preserve silent integrity," he recited from "Ars Poetica?," "thus earning the respect of their relatives and neighbors." Or perhaps he was simply gathering his thoughts to announce the end of a long and, certainly in his eyes, far from respectful silence.

During the two decades since Milosz's defection from Soviet-occupied Poland in 1951, the Communist authorities had enforced a ban on the publication of his work throughout the country. This official silence was "preserved" out of fear that the young poet's renegade, iconoclastic stance against the communist regime would upset the political balance. And as his stringently moving, anti-communist memoir *The Captive Mind* has continued to demonstrate since its publication in Paris and New York in 1953, they had good reason. Now, however, instead of preserving silence, integrity was about to break it. "By the way," Milosz began, as if an afterthought or aphorism were to follow, "now they are going to publish my poems in Poland."

Had it been just five years later — after he had been awarded the Nobel Prize in 1980 and after the clear-sighted intelligence, grace, and accessibility of his style had begun to gain him international renown — no doubt such an announcement would have received the stirring applause it deserved. In 1975, however, it was greeted by an embarrassingly unknowing silence. It's hardly a surprise that two years later, in his Blakean memoir *The Land of Ulro* (Paris, 1977), a poet of such abstraction, philosophical breadth, and seeming universality as Milosz should admit to an enduring "obsession" with silence and then confess: "I do not believe in the possibility of communing outside a shared language, a shared history" (*To Begin* 8).

Nov two years after his death at the age of ninety-three, we can once again celebrate his refusal to allow this skepticism to prevent his work from reaching beyond its original language. The new, sleekly-bound *Selected Poems: 1931-2004*, as sparing a selection as it may be, is yet another testament to the bounty of this refusal and to a literary career whose intellectual scope, generic variety, and international attention has few rivals in the later twentieth century.

By the time of his reading at the Guggenheim, Milosz's skepticism had matured and deepened with the weight of religious conviction, but it had not always been so. As a law student in the early '30s, he helped to found the left-wing literary group *Zagary* ("Brushwood," after the short-lived eponymous journal) and modeled his caustic political lyrics on revolutionary Russian poetry. Out of political estrangement and social animosity, then, came his conviction of the mind's essential isolation from other minds. "The age of homelessness had dawned," he would later declare (Anders 51). And it's the same sense of alienation and homelessness — writ large across a metaphysical field — that eventually led to his belief in man's estrangement from the order of nature; in the warring forces of historical necessity and meaninglessness; and in the spiritual corruption of the contemporary world. The early stirrings of these fundamentally Romantic views prompted (and were doubtless nurtured by) his involvement with the "catastrophist" school, a Marxist-inspired group that foretold the inevitable destruction of contemporary value and belief systems. Though he soon abandoned Marxism and historical determinism for metaphysics and philosophical paradox, his thought never shook off the hobgoblin of

historical determinism, or in his eyes, the sense of grave, irreversible historical momentum hurling us toward the end-times.

As is the case with the 1988 *Collected Poems* and the splendid *New and Collected Poems: 1931-2001*, the new Ecco Press edition preserves little of Milosz's work before his magisterial coming-of-age volume, *Rescue (1945)*. There, however, against the unpromising backdrop of determinism and catastrophe, we find "Encounter," one of his most well-known and beloved early lyrics:

We were riding through the frozen fields in a wagon at dawn. A red wing rose in the darkness.
And suddenly a hare ran across the road. One of us pointed to it with his hand.

That was long ago. Today neither of them is alive,
Not the hare, nor the man who made the gesture.

O my love, where are they, where are they going,
The flash of a hand, streak of movement, rustle of pebbles.
I ask not out of sorrow, but in wonder. (9)

This crystalline lyric (a deft variation on the classical *ubi sunt* theme) has been so frequently anthologized, I believe, for all of the wrong reasons, not least of which is its apparent debt to an imagist poetics fundamentally opposed to Milosz's convictions about the purpose and scope of poetry. Pebbles rustling under the wagon, petals slipping from a black bough: modernists like Pound taught us how to understand these images as flashes of imaginative and emotional intensity, preserving a moment that would otherwise slip into oblivion. But for Milosz, they are only resting points, incomplete "gestures" on the way to that final line, whose simplicity and studied innocence strike a note uniquely his own.

Unlike in the high modernist poem, these images do not mitigate against the passing of time but rather intensify it, rushing us along much as the deceptive thrush does in Eliot's late, distinctly non-imagist *Four Quartets*: "Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind / Cannot bear very much reality." As lyric gestures, they are subordinated to the emotion of the conclusion, which comes to rest somewhere between childlike naiveté and the wonder that lies at the origins of philosophical thought. In that single line, two alternate and opposing modes of responding to loss — reverting to unthinking innocence or reaching for intellectual consolation — are sustained in an ambivalence that becomes one of Milosz's signature strategies.

Poems like "Encounter," "Campo dei Fiori," and "Statue of a Couple" are Milosz's first attempts to develop a contemplative, meditative verse form that will allow him to cultivate what he calls the poet's "double vision": the faculty of observing simultaneously from within, that is, the particular, and from above, the universal (*Nobel Lecture*). As he would quickly learn, such a strategy involves a sacrifice that not every poet is willing to make. It requires that the imagination — so often enamored with the ephemeral, the immediate, and the "savagely individualistic" — never wholly succumb to the temptations of the present tense, that it constantly look both *at* and *beyond* its object of attention, measuring the intimate against the impersonal, or the joyous against the tragic (*Nobel Banquet*). His quiet, understated lyric sequence, "The World" (also in *Rescue*) is perhaps the most famous and most accomplished of this sort. Written near the end of WWII, the twenty carefully serene sketches of scenes from his childhood — pastoral vistas of Lithuania, memories of his father's wizard-like incantations and of his mother's heroic shadow battling with her child's nightmares — are delicately poised just at the brink of post-war Europe. Each trembles under the weight of an oncoming tragedy: orchids burst with "poisonous fire," "treacherous chasms" open just before us, and the "hot breath of the terrible beast" seethes just over our shoulder (53). The cloistered beauty of "The World" is one that sees itself already vanished, "snatched up," in Milosz's words, "by the hands of thieves" (49). The ink of these poems comes from the same "rural pen" with which William Blake's piper composes the *Songs of Innocence*, staining the clear water as his child-like muse vanishes in a haunting fit of laughter.

Rescue concludes, however (as Milosz always does), not with Blake's piper but with the voice of experience, the aged Bard who "Present, Past & Future sees" and for whom the injustice of suffering always outweighs the celebration of innocence. Here are the first and last stanzas of a poem that has been rightly compared to Yeats's "Easter, 1916," the masterful and evocative "Dedication":

You whom I could not save
Listen to me.
Try to understand this simple speech as I would be ashamed of another.
I swear, there is in me no wizardry of words.
I speak to you with silence like a cloud or a tree.

...
They used to pour millet on graves or poppy seeds To feed the dead who would come disguised as birds I put
this book here for you, who once lived
So that you should visit us no more. (39)

This is one of Milosz's most moving lyrics in the elegiac mode, one which casts a colder eye by remaining at once within ("Here is a broken city," he says midway through) and above ("with silence like a cloud") its purview of vision. In his grief, the speaker calls upon the shades of the dead only to scatter them with a tone at once tender and prophetic, one whose *pathos* reaches back to the epics of antiquity. The dedication to simplicity; the commitment to social, collective memory; and a reverence for the silence and intractability of the natural world: these are characteristic tones of the poetic voice that Milosz had developed by the time he left Poland and his native Lithuania behind.

In 1951 he defected to France, where he lived and wrote as an exile in Paris for ten years before taking a position as Professor of Slavic Languages at the University of California, Berkeley. In a penetrating early essay on his work, long-time friend and *co*-translator Robert Haas suggests that Milosz hadn't found his true *métier* until the transitional period between Paris and Berkeley, when he began to translate Simone Weil into Polish. "Contradiction is a lever of transcendence," Weil writes (Haas 143). And her love of tension and contradiction gave Milosz license to confront what was increasingly becoming the sole focus of his creative energies — the injustice and suffering of modern European history, and the exilic imagination's sleepless memory of it — without reducing it to a single paradigm, whether Marxist materialism or Christian teleology.

At Berkeley, Milosz's philosophical interests redoubled in intensity, but his probing questions into scholasticism and Manichaeism led him simultaneously toward an even more transparent, discursive style, one aimed at casting aside the "wizardry" of words yet reaching toward the transcendence of contradiction. "I have always aspired," he writes in "Ars Poetica?," "to a more spacious form / that would be free from the claims of poetry or prose / and would let us understand each other without exposing / the author or reader to sublime agonies" (88). He finds this form in long, meditative sequences like "From the Rising of the Sun" and "With Trumpet and Zithers," but also in brief, distilled lyrics that revolve around a single metaphor:

SECRETARIES

I am no more than a secretary of the invisible thing That is dictated to me and a few others.
Secretaries, mutually unknown, we walk the earth
Without much comprehension. Beginning a phrase in the middle
Or ending it with a comma. And how it all looks when completed
It is not up to us to inquire, we won't read it anyway. (141)

Here Milosz conjures the spirits of his visionary predecessors — Swedenborg, Blake, and Yeats all believed their work to be transcriptions of a higher, invisible world — but refuses to follow them to their Romantic heights. The resignation of that final line, however, seems unnecessary, since he has already transformed the ecstatic, romanticized prophet into the sober, wandering scribe by the time it appears. This sort of shoulder-

shrugging is an unappealing but thankfully rare phenomenon in Milosz's later verse as well. Like Zbigniew Herbert, another Polish master of subtlety and precision (whose irony, though, never descends to levity or caprice), Milosz chooses the sober classicism of the moderns over the epiphanies of romanticism. He prefers to hover with Horace's honey-bees rather than to soar with Pindar's eagles.

And yet in the context of his other work, even "Secretaries" does not escape Milosz's penchant for contradiction. He may be a custodian of the invisible, but he is also a sensitive purveyor of the worldly, a votary of the tangible and particular, and a believer in the intrinsic value of the phenomenal world. One of the poet's tasks, he writes in his 1980 Nobel lecture, is to "contemplate Being" in the grand philosophical sense. But the other, no less urgent charge is to engage and encounter the intimate details and objects of mundane reality, that is, of reality in what he calls "its naïve and solemn meaning, a meaning having nothing to do with philosophical debates" (*Nobel Lecture*). This is also the reality of the senses, of the unquenchable love we bear for daily pleasures and delights. "My Lord, I loved strawberry jam / And the dark sweetness of a woman's body," he admits in "Confession": "Also well-chilled vodka, herring in olive oil, / Scents, of cinnamon, of cloves. / So what kind of prophet am I?" (196). If there is one thing that Milosz's brand of classicism never fails to convey — and upon this his many admirers in the "secret brotherhood" of contemporary poets seem to agree — it is a sense of the humility of the poetic vocation (*Nobel Banquet*). "How enduring, how we need durability," he says in "At Dawn"; and it is Milosz's reverence for what is enduring, what does not slip through our fingers, that makes him such an impressive and foreign force among contemporary poets.

While Theodore Adorno was admonishing a generation against writing poetry after Auschwitz, who but Milosz could peer toward the same atrocity and pronounce, without irony, that "Human reason is beautiful and invincible," or that poetry is the ally of "Philo-Sophia ... in the service of the good"? The poet "saves austere and transparent phrases," he concludes with urgency and conviction reminiscent of Pound's diatribes, "From the filthy discord of tortured words" (87). This may not initially seem like humility, but it is *humilitas* in the ancient sense: the willingness to accept things in their proper places, to set human reason above animal ecstasy, and reality (both visible and invisible) above human reason. Against chaotic disorder and absolute necessity alike — both forces that, he believes, humiliate and reduce the human spirit — Milosz puts the illuminated and illuminating intelligence, "searching for meaning, grafted on darkness like a noble shoot onto a wild tree" (*To Begin* 238).

He is not only a devotee of the illuminating intelligence, however; his brief songs written by the light of the Romantic moon can be delightful in their candor and simplicity, their "wonder" in both of its senses.

WHEN THE MOON

When the moon rises and women in flower dresses are strolling,
I am struck by their eyes, eyelashes, and the whole arrangement of the world.
It seems to me that from such a strong mutual attraction
The ultimate truth should issue at last. (85)

We could speculate about the presence of irony in this exquisite short poem, or trace its philosophy to the amorous metaphysics of Dante and the Italian *Dolce stil novo*. But something about the relationship between the vast claims it makes ("ultimate truth" is a rare goal for the philosopher, much less for the poet) and the stark simplicity with which it makes them is disarming and delightful in itself. Such a short leap it is, Milosz suggests, from the eyes of a beloved to the world reflected in them, a world magnified and arranged not by the sun of the intellect but the moon of desire.

While it often proved a dependable imaginative catalyst — one that allowed him to recreate the tidal movements of epic in the restricted reservoir of lyric — Milosz's engagement with the inscrutable forces of history also proved, at times, a stubborn and intractable obstacle. He learned from Aristotle and Aquinas that no act is undertaken without an end in sight, that intention is but the end in reverse. But for the scholastics, as he well knew, every action finds its ultimate end in the beatific vision, in what we would now call the joy of self-

realization and fulfillment. For Milosz, who preferred Augustine's intransigent dualism to other, less radical explanations of evil, the end toward which time races is all too often destruction, violence, and unjustified suffering. He never abandoned the implausible dualistic belief that violence and suffering are the products of a malevolent deity in eternal conflict with the Godhead, and this obstinate dualism makes for a vision of injustice that often seems heavy-handed and overbearing.

"To recognize the world as ordinary is beyond my strength," he says in the late book of fragments and aphorisms, *Road-Side Dog* (1999): "Everything indicates that either it was created by the devil or ... is the result of a primordial catastrophe" (Anders 51). Milosz willfully backs away from the complexity of contradiction here. He knows that there are other alternatives, more difficult and more demanding explanations that have been crucial to theological debate for centuries, but he will not allow them to threaten this particular long-held belief. Especially from so intellectually generous a poet, such uncharacteristic reluctance is disappointing, and it forces us to entertain once again the familiar question that strong philosophical poets tend to provoke, namely: can good poetry come from flawed ideas? Or alternately, must a disagreeable idea vitiate an otherwise agreeable poem?

In the case of a poet like Milosz, who is so explicitly interested in philosophical tension and contradiction, the answer depends upon the particular poem at hand, and whether it conjures a speaker who thinks with the richness and complexity we expect from him. When the surface fails to offer the illusion of depth, both the idea and the poem have failed. Take for instance this short poem from the early '80's:

THE CITY

The city exulted, all in flowers.
Soon it will end: a fashion, a phase, the epoch, life. The terror and sweetness of a final dissolution.
Let the first bombs fall without delay. (187)

There's no emotional urgency to this voice; the stakes are set, but the outcome has already been decided. In addition, we cannot help but sense here a dubious inevitability like that of Thomas Hardy's novels, whose protagonists hurl curses at God for the outrageous, tragic misfortunes that, in reality, their author inflicted upon them with calm deliberation.

Milosz's least effective strategy is to reconstruct the perspective of a time before the ravages of the war, or before those of Soviet occupation, and then to "foretell" the coming destruction as if it were inevitable, a product of historical necessity and momentum. This is a bit of disingenuous narrative sleight-of-hand, and it sets the scenario for poems like his "Six Lectures in Verse":

How to tell it all? Referring to what chronicles?
Imagine a young man walking by a lake shore
On a hot afternoon. Dragonflies, diaphanous,
Over the rushes as always. But nothing of what's to come
Has yet arrived. Understand: nothing.

...
Bodies assigned for wounds, cities for destruction,
Pain of uncounted numbers, each pain one's own. (200)

It's not the painful recollection of a time before suffering that is disturbing here. Milosz always admired Dante's *Commedia* and would surely have recalled Francesca da Rimini's lament, in *Inferno* V, that no suffering is so great as to recall happiness in times of woe. Instead, it is the ineluctability, the unjust "assignation" of pain, at which even the most skeptical of humanists must balk.

We are compelled to ask if such a vision really does "tell it all"? Or if instead there lingers the suspicion that Milosz's unforgiving dualism has eclipsed all that might mitigate against it, like the banal choices of leaders, or the "uncounted" individual acts of tenderness and heroism by those who refused to accept the "assnation" of violence? There is a distance and abstraction here that finds no counterweight in detail and proximity, a detachment that disappoints because it refuses to answer what Milosz aptly names "the immense call of the Particular" (227). In the work composed not long before his death (especially in the brilliant *This* [2000] and his last volume, filled with sweetness and light, *A Second Space* [2004]), Milosz himself returned to doubt this one-sidedness. Only in recapturing some of the learned innocence of his earliest work can he see himself, after a lifetime of dread and anticipation, "saved by his amazement, eternal and divine" (CP 680).

In the eloquent introductory essay to the volume, "The Door Stands Open" (originally printed in September 2004 in *The New Republic*), Seamus Heaney suggests that Milosz's imagination "was at once a garden — now a monastery garden, now a garden of earthly delights — and a citadel," that is, that it preserved a space for joy within a fortress built upon suffering and pain ("poetry comes only from the pain," Milosz once observed [*To Begin* 309]). I suppose at times the bulwarks seem too high, the walls too impenetrable, for me to believe that the garden still thrives within. Joseph Brodsky, I believe, suffered from a similar affliction, one which Zbigniew Herbert and Heaney himself, both of whom were witness to similar historical violence, managed to avoid.

Like other strong philosophical poets (Wallace Stevens, for instance, or T. S. Eliot, whose *The Waste Land* he translated into Polish), Milosz revisits only a handful of intellectual problems. He is, however, a poet of seemingly infinite stylistic resources. He is just as comfortable in the long, lavishly rhetorical lines of *City Without a Name* (1969) as in the strict form and hermetic epigrams of *Hymn of the Pearl* (1981). The blocks of discursive, Augustan verse in *New Poems: 1985-1987* seem to embody the sluggishness of what he called that "tournament of hunchbacks, literature." But they, in turn, cleared the way for a refined, slender lyricism in *Provinces* (1991), which revels in "this velvety province of goodness" (CP 522), the "warm touch of cheeks," and "sheepskin overcoats / Belted with colorful wool" (CP 510): "Thus mankind returns to its beloved pastimes ... Taste and touch / Are dear to it" (516). This is where Milosz, I believe, is most thoroughly at home where he continually rediscovered what mattered to him as a poet, a political exile, and an international figure — somewhere between the mysteries of philosophy and the familiar, beloved intimacies of the everyday.

You are for me now
The mystery of time
i.e., of a person
Changing and the same,

Who runs in the garden
Fragrant after the rain
With a ribbon in your hair
And lives in the beyond.

You see how I try
To reach with words
What matters most
And how I fail. (CP 537)

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