

The Ecstatic Pessimist

With the death last year of Czeslaw Milosz, the world lost a Nobel Prize–winning poet and a singular voice of the 20th century. A survivor of Nazism and communism, Milosz refused to regard the world bleakly—or to retreat into the romantic illusions that beckoned to many of his fellow intellectuals. His intimate verses declare the individual’s connection to history, his spiritual autonomy, and his innate dignity.

by Robert Royal

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
Is not up to us to inquire, we won’t read it anyway.

(“Secretaries,” translated by Czeslaw Milosz and Robert Hass)

When Czeslaw Milosz died in August 2004, at the age of 93 and almost 25 years after winning the Nobel Prize for literature, perhaps the most surprising thing about the reaction around the world was not the unbroken praise for a universally admired poet and man but the urgent sense that Milosz matters and that we still have much to learn from him. That might seem a highly improbable view of a writer who was born before World War I in an obscure corner of Europe (the multiethnic Grand Duchy of Lithuania, then part of tsarist Russia), and who, even after more than 30 years of living in the United States, insisted on writing in his native Polish, a language little known outside its natural habitat. Yet despite Milosz’s modesty and self-deprecating humor (“I know what was left for smaller men like me: / A feast of brief hopes, a rally of the proud, / A tournament of hunchbacks, literature”), he occupies an indisputably central place in our attempts to understand contemporary culture and the world.

By a curious paradox, it was Milosz’s remote origins on the East-West border that gave him so powerful and individual a perspective—as did the additional experience, shared with many of his compatriots, of having been tried in the refiner’s fire of successive waves of Nazism and communism. Another poet might have retreated into an aesthetic dreamland, a tactic Milosz deplored in Western or



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Czeslaw Milosz in the garden of his Berkeley, California home in 1992.

Eastern European writers. Or he might have turned into the kind of engagé intellectual common in Europe after World War II. But Czeslaw Milosz (pronounced CHESS-wahf MEE-wosh) thought that those fashionable figures, whose drug of choice was most often either communism or existentialism, were equally “talking in their sleep.” He moved with simple ease, at great depth, and without flinching through the thorniest modern cultural questions, seeking a more livable world for the human race in what he did not hesitate to call reality.



One sign of his sheer intellectual power is that instead of lapsing into paralysis, the common malady, he turned the very contradictions and challenges into a source of insight. After the war, he underwent a remarkable inward transformation that gave his work, which had already been

strong, still greater resonance. By some strange poetical alchemy, he was able to transmute personal reactions to the world into a wide-ranging and always illuminating confessional poetry—but not the kind of solipsistic confessionalism so familiar to anyone who reads modern verse. Miłosz regarded subjectivism as the primary threat of a decadent age, the flight from reality to romantic illusions that in our time cannot be indulged without inviting disaster. Though he never wrote a single great work, such as a *Divine Comedy* or *Paradise Lost*, he produced, year after year, hundreds of pages of poetry objectively recording the full range of perceptions of someone who had witnessed the titanic struggles and intellectual dead ends of the 20th century. He describes the change in his work this way: “I had written poems on ‘social’ themes and had been bothered by their artificiality. I had practiced ‘pure’ poetry and been no less irritated. Only now had the contradiction vanished. Now even the most personal poem translated a human situation and contained a streak of irony that made it objective. . . . By fusing individual and historical elements in my poetry, I had made an alloy that one seldom encounters in the West.”

The poetry he wrote after World War II carries a fresh current of life. One of the more political poems was so powerful that some of its lines were chiseled decades later on a monument in Gdańsk to slain members of Poland’s heroic union Solidarity: “You who wronged a simple man. . . . Do not feel safe. The poet remembers. / You can kill one, but another is born. / The words are written down, the deed, the date.” In other poems, he is more concerned with capturing ignored truths and moments of insight that may lead to a different kind of life, though he is wary and ironic toward the culture that has to sustain that life:

Treasure your legacy of skills, child of Europe,
Inheritor of Gothic cathedrals, of baroque churches,
Of synagogues filled with the wailing of a wronged people.
Successor of Descartes, Spinoza, inheritor of the word “honor,”
Posthumous child of Leonidas,
Treasure the skills acquired in the hour of terror.

(“Child of Europe,” translation by Jan Darowski)

Another dimension of Miłosz’s work appears in the imagery here: He is a religious poet, a Catholic of a unique personal cast, despite recurrent doubts. He was repelled early on by the right-wing Polish Catholicism that he often deprecated as merely a “national rite” and deeply marred by anti-Semitism—a trait that did not exist with the same virulence in the more easygoing and diverse Wilno (his preferred name for Vilnius) of his younger days, where there was a large and vibrant Jewish community.

Another great modern Polish poet, Adam Zagajewski, has explained the religious dimension of Miłosz’s work as a defense of “our right to infinity” despite all the well-known contemporary objections: “The telegram Nietzsche sent to inform Europeans of God’s death reached him, of course, but he refused to sign the receipt and sent the messenger packing.” Witty, but perhaps slight-

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ly misleading. Milosz had gotten a good education in Vilnius and had taken deeply to heart the perennial philosophical and theological disputes in the Western tradition. He was no more susceptible to facile disbelief than to blind belief: “My imperviousness to the usually rather shallow progressive-atheist arguments was like the chess player’s contempt for cards.” But there were challenges of many other kinds all the same.

Of course, he was to be deeply shaken by the political atrocities and perversions that would destroy the social and natural world he had loved as a boy. His mature work tenderly preserves a highly colored and detailed memory of the Lithuanian countryside and his passionate attachment to it, and perhaps the memory is given

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more emotion by the circumstances of exile. He was the kind of boy who had an insect collection, learned the names (often in Latin) of trees, birds, and flowers, and liked kayaking and wilderness camping. He didn’t much care for other sports, but no one reading him will take away the picture of a Slavic nerd. He always displays strong masculine energy, combined with great poetic sensitivity toward nature and human value.

In any event, Milosz’s active intelligence did not allow him to indulge in mere nostalgia. His unashamed defense of his childhood experience had to confront something that he came to realize even before the political upheavals: The very structure of nature—quite apart from what we humans do to one another—seemed to him pitiless, as did, at times, its Creator. Nature was morally innocent, because its destruction of humanity and the Darwinian survival of the fittest were mechanical, not malicious. But any honest look at our situation had to allow for the indifference of the world, the passing of all things, and the fragility of memory—precious and to be cultivated while it lasted but unable finally to prevail over time. That perception lies behind his often-expressed sympathy for the Manichaeans, the early Christian heretics and their successors who believed that this world must have been created by an evil *daimon*. Goodness and a good God, if one exists, would have to lie beyond this world with its undeniable evils.

So Milosz was not much impressed with Theodor Adorno’s later remark that it was impossible to write poetry after Auschwitz. The Shoah was a special evil, but we are deluding ourselves if we do not see that nature itself is continually committing innocent outrages. If the voice of poetry were to be stopped by the mere fact of great evils, then poetry would not be possible in any age. But this bleak vision of nature was not for Milosz the whole picture: “Nothing could stifle my inner certainty that a shining point exists where all lines intersect.” He regularly experienced and recorded in his poetry moments of transcendence, even—indeed, especially—when he contemplated nature. To pick only one example out of hundreds, there is this in “Gift,” recording a day when he was 60 and living in Berkeley:

Czesław Miłosz

A day so happy.
Fog lifted early, I worked in the garden.
Hummingbirds were stopping over honeysuckle flowers.
There was no thing on earth I wanted to possess.
I knew no one worth my envying him.
Whatever evil I had suffered, I forgot.
To think that once I was the same man did not embarrass me.
In my body, I felt no pain.
When straightening up, I saw the blue sea and sails.
(Translation by Czesław Miłosz)

He had experienced similar moments even in the terrifying years before and during World War II, so it was not mere literary affectation when he stated, “I was always an ecstatic pessimist.”

The significance of all this for Miłosz as poet is probably best seen in his 1980 Nobel Lecture. Unlike many such texts before and since, Miłosz’s is no grandiose philosophical sermon. The overarching point to his witty and humane discourse is that, in our time, it is a blessing to be from a small, obscure, and particular place and culture. If you are writing in a little-known language in France or the United States (as Miłosz was), the realization keeps you faithful to “a certain ideal image of a poet, who, if he wants fame, wants to be famous only in the village or town of his birth.” Though to Western ears this sounds like a sure formula for provinciality, it actually leads not to slavery to literary fashion but to serious engagement with concrete things. The poet thus situated is forced into a dialogue between past and present as he looks for a way to adapt an inherited poetic language to express unprecedented circumstances. In Miłosz’s view, being in this position has large repercussions.

To begin with, it enables the poet to avoid the twin dangers of mere traditionalism on the one hand and an empty avant-gardism on the other (the totalitarians, he points out elsewhere, were quite indulgent of avant-gardism because of its ultimate powerlessness; it was the poet who approached reality whom they attacked). The perpetually unsettled state of the poet makes him a restless seeker: “And it may happen that, leaving books behind as if they were dry snake skins, in a constant escape forward from what has been done in the past, he receives the Nobel Prize. What is this enigmatic impulse that does not allow one to settle down in the achieved, the finished? I think it is the quest for reality. I give to this word its naive and solemn meaning, a meaning having nothing to do with philosophical debates of the last few centuries.” Instead, as a child of Eastern Europe in the first half of the 20th century, Miłosz thinks this pursuit of reality—however much derided in more sophisticated milieus—has a central human importance.

The great prestige of science and technology in the 19th and 20th centuries gave rise to regimes based on scientific notions of society; and, with total confidence in themselves, those regimes murdered tens of millions around the globe. One mark of the totalitarian systems was their fear of realities beyond the reach of their systems: “Precisely for that reason, some ways of life, some institutions, became a target for the fury of evil forces, above all, the bonds between people that exist organically, as if by themselves, sustained by family, religion, neigh-

borhood, common heritage. In other words, all that disorderly, illogical humanity, so often branded as ridiculous because of its parochial attachments and loyalties." Much, of course, depends on the quality of those loyalties, but dismissing them out of hand as "unscientific" led to far greater atrocities than the old order ever produced.



The intellectual background to all this is clearest in *The Captive Mind*, an analysis of the state of intellectuals' souls under socialism that Milosz published in 1953. The book expanded his visibility enormously in Europe and America. To re-read it today, more than a decade after the fall of Soviet communism, is to be astonished, page after page, not only by the sheer genius of the exposition but by the then-recent defector's almost superhuman refusal to indulge in simplistic hatred or bitterness. There is nothing in world literature even remotely like *The Captive Mind*, except perhaps Octavio Paz's *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, which also combines a poet's sensitivity and intuitiveness with a powerful but sympathetic intelligence about a whole society, of which the writer cannot deny that he is a part.

Milosz had seen both the sign outside the Warsaw ghetto, "Jews, Lice, Typhus," intended to scare off visitors, and the arrival of the first troops of the Red Army in Warsaw, "led by a young woman, felt-booted and carrying a sub-machine gun." Like many liberals in the old Poland, he had been revolted by the mindless carnage of the Third Reich (Milosz himself barely escaped one roundup of young Poles who were sent to Auschwitz; several friends, Jews and Gentiles alike,

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were not so lucky). But they thought it might be possible to avoid a stark choice between East and West, and he asserts right off that it would be "wrong to treat their hopes as matter for contempt." But they—and he—were defeated by a powerful opponent that moved relentlessly into every nook and cranny of daily life.

Milosz tried to find a seam of freedom within the "Diamat," the orthodox dialectical materialism that the Leninist-Stalinist system introduced everywhere. In recognition of his work, and even though he was not a member of the Communist Party, from 1945 until 1951 he was posted as cultural attaché in the Polish embassies in Paris and Washington, and briefly at the Polish consulate in New York. But the tightening noose of Soviet thought (which Milosz elsewhere allows had only distant connections to real Marxism) caused him to revolt—though not, he specifies, solely for high-minded motives: "A man may persuade himself, by the most logical reasoning, that he will greatly benefit his health by swallowing live frogs; and, thus rationally convinced, he may swallow a first frog, then the second; but at the third his stomach will revolt. In the same way, the growing influence of the doctrine on my way of thinking came up against the resistance of my whole nature." He defected in France in 1951, and moved to America in 1960 to become a professor of Slavic languages and lit-

erature at the University of California, Berkeley.

The continuing interest *The Captive Mind* holds for the reader lies not in its author's revulsion toward a discredited system but in his penetrating portraits of people. Miłosz uses several friends as matter for analysis, and their pseudonyms already tell much: Alpha, the Moralist; Beta, the Disappointed Lover; Gamma, the Slave of History; and Delta, the Troubadour. But he does not subject them to ad hominem attacks. Indeed, by selecting friends with whom he still feels some connection, Miłosz, always the poet of the concrete, forces himself to deal with artists and writers in communist countries as real people in specific circumstances, an approach often lost in ideological arguments. They might appear to have sold themselves to tyranny, but "the truth is more involved," and Miłosz did not exempt himself from judgment by that truth.

To begin with, all these individuals, even the ones who considered themselves Catholics, were vulnerable to the creeping nihilism of European thought in recent centuries, a nihilism that had been unintentionally reinforced by Western science and technology. They were horrified by Nazism, whose effects they had seen in their own country. And they did not like Russia very much, even before the old Russian inferiority complex, the deep source of its messianism, was transformed into the new faith of communism. At the same time, they had no confidence in a Western Europe that had self-destructed because it was willing to accept slavery in order to survive (Miłosz made a similar complaint in the 1990s when Europe failed to deal with Bosnia, and he predicted serious consequences). Even America, the first society to have provided for the material welfare of most of its people, and one that still possessed some of the virtues needed to face totalitarianism,

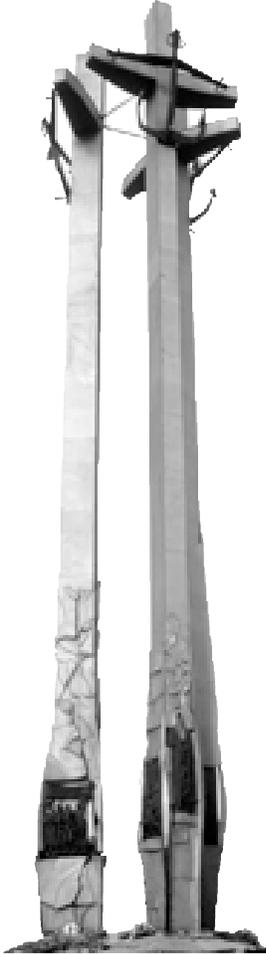
was quite naive about the threats in the world.

Many of these individuals turned to the practice of *Ketman*, a Persian term Miłosz had encountered in reading about Islam, which justified lying about one's loyalty to the Persian system for the sake of preserving such humane values as can be sheltered in small enclaves. He

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records that in Poland people in authority who attempted this difficult balancing act laughed at émigrés who criticized them without understanding the difficult game they were playing. It is astonishing that, in the midst of the East-West struggle and having recently gone into exile, Miłosz had the intellectual balance to let this claim appear for what it was—not an outright exoneration of those who let themselves be drawn into the tangle of untruth, murderous practice, and laudable attempts to mitigate what could not be changed. At the same time, Miłosz's parsing of the whole structure of mendacity is a devastating indictment of a system, if not of the people who were stranded inside it.

Miłosz even allowed that intellectuals in those circumstances had some advantages over their Western counterparts. For one thing, they didn't suffer gladly the triviality of some forms of thought and art from the West: "In the intellectuals



At the Gdańsk shipyard where Solidarity was born, the Solidarity Monument bears the penultimate stanza of this poem by Czesław Miłosz. When Miłosz visited the monument in 1981, after 30 years of exile in the West, members of Solidarity unfurled a huge banner with the message “The People Will Give Strength Unto Their Poet.”

You who wronged

You who wronged a simple man
 Bursting into laughter at the crime,
 And kept a pack of fools around you
 To mix good and evil, to blur the line,

Though everyone bowed down before you,
 Saying virtue and wisdom lit your way,
 Striking gold medals in your honor,
 Glad to have survived another day,

Do not feel safe. The poet remembers.
 You can kill one, but another is born.
 The words are written down, the deed, the date.

And you’d have done better with a winter dawn,
 A rope, and a branch bowed beneath your weight.

(Translation by Richard Lourie)

who lived through the atrocities of war in Eastern Europe there took place what one might call the *elimination of emotional luxuries*. Psychoanalytic novels incite them to laughter. They consider the literature of erotic complications, still popular in the West, as trash. Imitation abstract painting bores them. They are angry—but they want bread, not hors d’oeuvres.” These intellectuals found it difficult to understand how a Westerner such as George Orwell had perfectly intuited life under totalitarianism without ever having experienced it.

Miłosz went out of his way a couple of times in *The Captive Mind* to rebuke Western writers who thought Marxism could be a remedy for social problems in their own countries. A special target was Pablo Neruda, the Chilean poet who was a Communist and, later, a fellow Nobel laureate. Miłosz allowed that Neruda might be right about the suffering of the Chilean people “as long as he speaks about what he knows; I stop believing him when he starts to speak about what I know myself. . . . He is wrong . . . when he believes that all the protesting voices of Central and Eastern Europe are the voices of stubborn nationalism or the yelps of wronged reaction.” Miłosz, of course, was both discriminating in his judgments here and bluntly right about the romantic

hopes in communism, but he was sharply criticized by the French Left for that very reason, as was his friend Albert Camus when his own critique of communist illusions, *The Rebel*, appeared. Only with the publication of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* in the 1970s were large segments of the Western intelligentsia ultimately convinced. Yet Miłosz's book stands as an early and honorable effort that fell neither into anticommunist hysteria nor into a cowardly evasion of frightening truths.

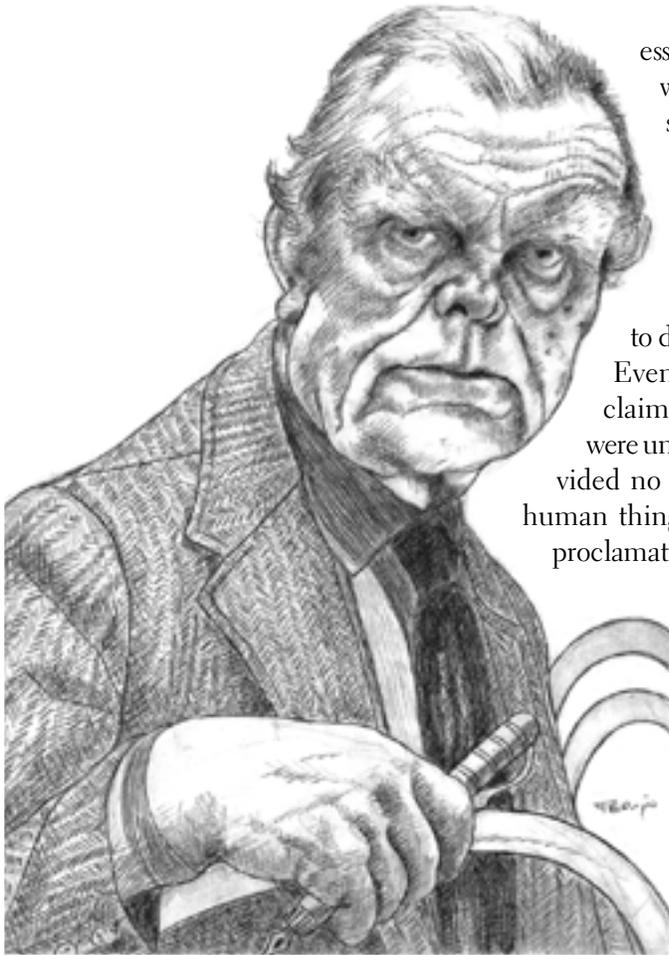


But the political dimension of the 20th century is only one side of Miłosz's work, as it is only one side of human life. Two of Miłosz's autobiographical efforts, *Native Realm: A Search for Self-Definition* (1968) and *The Land of Ulro* (1977), continued to mine the personal dimension, but not for subjective purposes. In these rich memoirs, which often provide a highly detailed starting point for reflections on the task of poetry and the state of the human race in the late 20th century, we can discern both the permanent contribution Miłosz made to modern thinking and a still-current invitation to live out some difficult truths that do not come naturally to us in modern societies. For Miłosz, the West, like the East, suffered from a reductionist view of the human person rooted in the flat and mechanical world of modern physics. The autobiographical works point to the urgency of finding a different way of experiencing and conceptualizing the world. Toward the end of *Native Realm*, Miłosz formulates it in terms of poetry: "Poetic discipline is impossible without piety and admiration, without faith in the infinite layers of being that are hidden within an apple, a man, or a tree; it challenges one through becoming to move closer to what is."

That may appear a hopelessly abstract statement, but in actuality it expresses a whole program of life that avoids both the deadening vision of materialism and, its literary counterweight, the unreal fantasies of Romanticism. Miłosz spells this out openly in *The Land of Ulro*, in which he presents a kind of modern pantheon of poets and writers who sought to break the stranglehold of the dead Newtonian universe on the human imagination. The first is Goethe, who, in both his poetry and his writings on science, "waged a Thirty Years' War against Newton." Along with him Miłosz cites William Blake (from whose work he got the name *Ulro*, the world of mechanism), the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, the great Polish Romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz, and the modern French thinker Simone Weil. But for Miłosz the most influential representative of this tradition is a distant relative, Oscar V. de L. Miłosz, himself a powerful poet, whom he met in Paris during his twenties. Oscar Miłosz's work, Czesław humbly reports, "without exaggeration, decided my intellectual career."

To list these poets and their concerns risks reducing a complex argument to what seems merely "a fall into mysticism," a phrase Miłosz says was used in Polish literary circles to signify that a writer had uncritically embraced the tenets of religion and was therefore no longer intellectually interesting. The members of Miłosz's pantheon do quite the opposite. Like Václav Havel in more recent days, they all seem to be seeking the space to imagine something difficult to formulate in merely scientific terms. In the old Newtonian system, the world was





essentially an infinite billiard table on which balls randomly collided. In such a world, how could human value—or even an appreciation of the beauty of the world—truly be imagined? The Nazis had tried to use force and the communists the magic trick of the dialectic of history to derive value from what had no values. Even in the West, which loudly proclaimed human dignity, good intentions were undermined by a vision of reality that provided no substantial support for all the most human things, that indeed hollowed out such proclamations even as they were being made.

Milosz came to believe that the Einsteinian universe, which the poets partly anticipated, with its insistence on the demonstrable relatedness of things rather than relativity in the moral sense, and its unusual view of space as a self-involved phenomenon rather than an empty expanse, offered a chance to reimagine the things he had cherished since boyhood. His

last book of poetry, *Second Space*, published posthumously in October 2004, is his attempt to explore that realm himself.



It was an oddity of history that this man, so deeply rooted in particular memories and experiences in the East, should have spent many of his mature years—indeed, from 1961 until he returned to Poland in 1991—in the West, teaching at Berkeley. He admired the dynamism of the United States. (He once wrote of his stint as cultural attaché, “The air in America, even summer in Washington with its 98-degree humidity, did not make me lethargic. It exhilarated me,” and of the American countryside, “It restored me to my boyhood.”) But he also deplored America’s ahistorical existence and materialism. He had a wide circle of friendships among American poets, but he was most strongly attracted to Walt Whitman and, among modern writers, to Robert Frost and Robinson Jeffers, whom he translated. The Manichaeism in him resonated to the dark strain in the latter two poets. Jeffers in particular, who had isolated himself in the then-sleepy California fishing town of Carmel, exerted a hold on Milosz’s imagination—but one that Milosz strove to resist. The cruel and impersonal nature of Jeffers’s universe and his “inhumanism,” a worship of large natural phenomena and

the Darwinian survival of the fittest, came dangerously close to Miłosz's own pessimistic perceptions of the world. But the Pole would not assent fully to this worship of necessity. In a poem to Jeffers, he allows that the poet is powerful, "And yet you did not know what I know. The earth teaches / More than does the nakedness of elements." Miłosz concludes:

Better to carve suns and moons on the joints of crosses
as was done in my district. To birches and firs
give feminine names. To implore protection
against the mute and treacherous might
than to proclaim, as you did, an inhuman thing.
(Translation by Czesław Miłosz and Richard Lourie)

One of the distinctive characteristics of all Miłosz's work is his deep and constant perception that hardheaded, discursive reason neither explains nor offers a solution to our circumstances. He developed this understanding through his own great intelligence. Philosophy and theology have wandered into miasmal swamps in our day, so the knowledge that poetry can bring to us, he realized, becomes more urgent. It was no accident that in his old age Miłosz decided to translate the Book of Apocalypse into Polish, and even learned Hebrew in order to translate some of the Old Testament as well. He frequently spoke about his *daimonion*, a term Plato used for the voice that guided Socrates, and that Miłosz seems to have thought of, quite literally, as a kind of muse, an inspiration from some part of the human mind or spirit to which most of us have little access but that is wiser than we usually are.

In the last poem ("Orpheus and Eurydice") of the posthumous volume *Second Space*, written after communism fell and he moved to Kraków, Miłosz restated his belief in the poet as a channel for a voice of reality: "He submitted to the music, yielded / To the dictation of a song, listening with rapt attention, / Became, like his lyre, its instrument." And what was the content of that song? The answer shows that, to the very end, Miłosz's *daimonion* did not abandon him:

He sang the brightness of mornings and green rivers,
He sang of smoking water in the rose-colored daybreaks,
Of colors: cinnabar, carmine, burnt sienna, blue,
Of the delight of swimming in the sea under marble cliffs,
Of feasting on a terrace above the tumult of a fishing port,
Of the tastes of wine, olive oil, almonds, mustard, salt,
Of the flight of the swallow, the falcon,
Of a dignified flock of pelicans above a bay,
Of the scent of an armful of lilacs in summer rain,
Of his having composed his words always against death
And of having made no rhyme in praise of nothingness.

This is Orpheus's song, but let it stand, too, for Miłosz. If the Poles are looking for an epitaph to put on his tomb, which is in the crypt of the Kraków cathedral, among the kings, saints, and writers of Poland, they need look no further. □