

# The Poet's Work

AN INTRODUCTION TO  
Czeslaw Milosz

BY

Leonard Nathan  
and  
Arthur Quinn

# The Poet's Work

AN INTRODUCTION TO CZESLAW MILOSZ

Leonard Nathan  
and  
Arthur Quinn

Harvard University Press  
Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England  
1991



Copyright © 1991 by the President and  
Fellows of Harvard College

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is printed on acid-free paper, and its binding materials  
have been chosen for strength and durability.

Library of Congress cataloging information is on last page of book.

## Foreword

As if literary history itself had overcome, by way of exception, its usual dislike for round figures, this book will appear in bookstores almost exactly eighty years after its subject was born (on June 30, 1911), sixty years after he cofounded, as a student at Stefan Batory University in Wilno, the pathbreaking poetry group Zagary, forty years after he asked for political asylum in France and became an emigré, thirty years after he settled permanently in the United States, and ten years after his triumphant return to Poland in the wake of the Nobel Prize in literature (awarded to him in 1980). Viewed from the less global perspective of Cambridge, Massachusetts, the publication of this book also marks the tenth anniversary of Czeslaw Milosz's Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard, published later as *The Witness of Poetry* by Harvard University Press.

Faced with this list of anniversaries, which add up to a miniaturized review of Milosz's career, and reminded once again of Joseph Brodsky's well-known description of Milosz as "one of the greatest poets of our time, perhaps the greatest," readers may experience genuine astonishment upon learning that the volume they have just



opened is actually the first book-length introduction to the Polish poet's work written by American critics. The few books on Milosz available in English are either, like Aleksander Fiut's *The Eternal Moment: The Poetry of Czesław Miłosz*, studies written originally in Polish by a Polish author or, all their merits notwithstanding, collections of essays written on selected works and topics without aspiring to a comprehensive picture or methodic presentation, as is the case of Donald Davie's otherwise penetrating *Czesław Miłosz and the Insufficiency of Lyric*. In addition, numerous essays on Milosz and reviews of his books, ranging from brilliant to banal and from insightful to insipid, can be found in American literary periodicals and collections of essays of individual critics; still none of these works can serve as a detailed and fully reliable introduction even to the body of Milosz's writings available in English, not to mention the entirety of his oeuvre.

The emigré poet's reception in the language, culture, and society that together form his second, adopted homeland—that special issue of comparative literary history is still waiting for its explorer. The very formulation of the methodology of such an exploration would be a highly complex task, involving disciplines as diverse as cultural semiotics, the theory of translation, and the sociology of literature, to name but a few. To follow all these diverse lines at once would reveal many factors that have combined to delay the recognition of Milosz's poetic work in the west. One of these factors is, obviously enough, of a linguistic nature: the difficulty of translating poetry in general is even greater in the case of largely incompatible languages such as Polish and English. As if that were not enough, among twentieth-century Polish poets Milosz is one of the hardest to translate. On an imaginary scale of difficulty, his work, to be sure, would be placed below such language prestidigitators and experimenters as Bolesław Lesmian or Miron Białoszewski, but far above Wisława Szymborska, Zbigniew Herbert, or in particular Tadeusz Rozewicz.

Another factor has to do with history, politics, and demands of the literary market. After he became an emigré, Milosz sacrificed a considerable part of his time and creative energy to capturing the atten-



tion of western audiences by writing essays and works of fiction (*The Captive Mind* and *The Seizure of Power* are two examples) addressed directly to them and dealing with the most burning political issues of the day, such as the fate of Central Europe under Communist rule and the ominous spread of what was later called the “totalitarian temptation” among western intellectuals. Thus his literary career and reception in the west suffered for many years from a sort of optical distortion: his fame as a political essayist grew disproportionately, while his achievement as a poet was recognized almost exclusively by his Polish readers. (Even that recognition, by the way, was far off the mark because of another set of extraliterary factors. During the first three decades of Milosz’s exile, his poetry enjoyed only a limited popularity among Polish emigré readers, a cultural community for the most part too much bent on preserving traditional values to appreciate his innovative work; and in Poland itself, at least until the mid-seventies, readers were almost completely barred from his work by Communist censorship.)

It was not until Milosz took the promotion of his poetry in the west into his own hands and began to translate it into English himself (helped by numerous American collaborators, some of them his Berkeley graduate students) that it started making its way to international recognition. The publication of his *Selected Poems* in 1973 marks the beginning of what can be called his career as a poet in America, if not an American poet.

The American critics who took interest in his work, however, faced a complicated set of hindrances and difficulties, alleviated only recently by the publication of his *Collected Poems, 1931–1987* in 1988. Before this book’s appearance, the American critic could feel justifiably uncertain in dealing with Milosz’s poetry. If one was not able to read the Polish originals, one could never be sure, first, to what extent the part of Milosz’s output made available to the English-speaking reader was representative of the entirety of the poet’s work; second, to what extent the contents and the inner order of the four collections Milosz had published in English reflected the pattern of his evolution; and third, perhaps most important, to what extent the trans-



lation was able to render the original quality of the work. If we add the fact that during the 1960s and 1970s Milosz's essayistic work, of which not *The Captive Mind* but, rather, books such as *The Land of Ulro* were becoming increasingly representative, also remained largely unknown to the English-speaking audience and thus could not serve as an aid in critical interpretation, it is not surprising that no comprehensive book on Milosz was written until now by American critics.

Still it might be said that the critics let themselves be intimidated too much. After all, Milosz's English output is not just another example of the typical situation in which an exotic author's work is presented to a western audience in some accidentally selected fragments by an accidentally appointed translator who is not necessarily an expert on this particular author's work. On the contrary, Milosz's is a unique case of a poet who either translates himself into a foreign language or actively collaborates with his translators, the latter being veritable Milosz specialists. In other words, English versions of his books present us with a rare opportunity of dealing with translations that, even though they may differ to some extent from the original for natural linguistic and cultural reasons, are still texts for which Milosz assumes total responsibility.

Under such circumstances, what might seem self-contradictory—a critic's attempt to give Milosz's work a holistic interpretation while dealing only with that part of his work available in English—can be taken as a fully legitimate effort. At this point the translated part covers nearly all of the poet's oeuvre, while the translation itself, instead of being a veil dimming the radiance of the original meanings, offers the reader exactly the meanings that the author himself has taken care to preserve in the even brighter light of his second language. Further, the critic's attempt to introduce the English-speaking reader to Milosz's work viewed as a whole is more than simply legitimate if the critics in question are Leonard Nathan and Arthur Quinn, two of the poet's Berkeley colleagues. Their thorough familiarity with Milosz's poetry, fiction, and essays (in Nathan's case, the special familiarity of a cotranslator of many of the most difficult

poems) is a result of not merely close reading of the texts but also of discussing them in long detail with the author. For Milosz's Polish readers, such as myself, there is nothing in Nathan and Quinn's book that would not be confirmed by what a reading of the poet's other, so far untranslated works might bring in; and there is, as well, a great deal to learn here. This book is no doubt just what Milosz's work needs as the poet reaches his eightieth year: a way of looking back at his six decades of writing to discover the underlying unity.

*Stanislaw Baranczak*



For in this period the poet's work is done: and all the great  
Events of time start forth and are conceived in such a period—  
Within a moment: a pulsation of the artery.

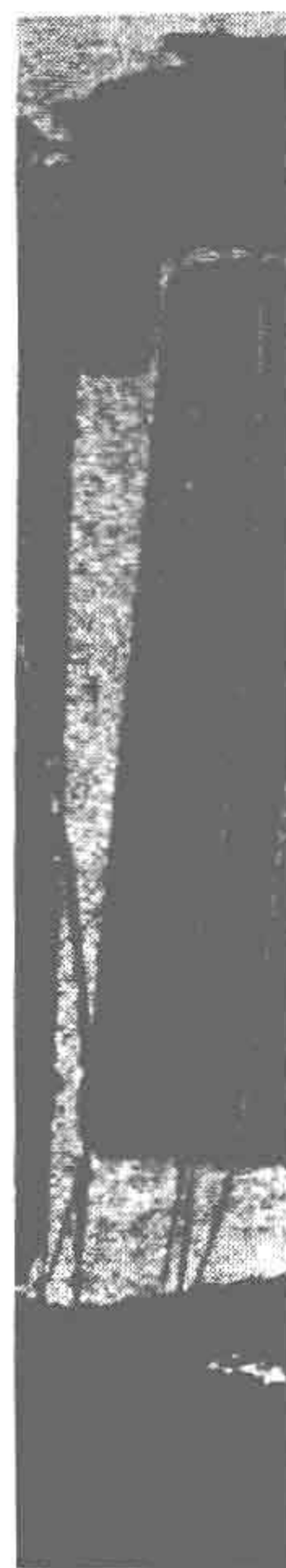
William Blake, *Milton*, plate 29

# Contents

<i>Foreword by Stanislaw Baranczak</i>	<i>vii</i>
1. San Francisco Bay	1
2. Poland	9
3. Paris	31
4. A Magic Mountain	65
5. The World, Again	99
6. Milosz Collected	155
<i>Bibliography and Abbreviations</i>	<i>165</i>
<i>Notes</i>	<i>167</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>174</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>175</i>



# 1 San Francisco Bay



Czeslaw Milosz's *Visions from San Francisco Bay*, a collection of essays first published in Polish in 1969 almost a decade after he arrived at Berkeley, has been the most neglected of his translated works. At first glance the neglect is surprising, for this book could be for most American readers the best introduction to Milosz's work as a whole. Here in a series of short essays Milosz presents more plainly than anywhere else his view of the human condition. But this is precisely what explains the neglect: Milosz's vision of our predicament is enough to make any complacent reader wince.

To be sure, *Visions from San Francisco Bay* was widely reviewed when it came out in 1982. And all the reviews we read were positive, respectful, sometimes enthusiastic, always full of good cheer. It was the good cheer that bothered us. The reviewer in the *San Francisco Chronicle* liked the book because here one could learn the poet's response to highways, underground newspapers, sidewalk preachers, supermarkets. Reading this review was like watching Milosz himself being trimmed and put under cellophane for supermarket display, somewhere between the capers and the fresh salmon. The best of the

reviews—and a careful, intelligent essay it was—bore the title “The Devil and Mr. Milosz.” Here was that good cheer again, the demonic voices evoked by Milosz rechanneled to sound amusing, as if from George Bernard Shaw or *The Screwtape Letters*. Milosz was being praised into inconsequence.<sup>1</sup>

*Visions from San Francisco Bay* itself offers a description and explanation of this strange process, with respect not to Milosz himself but rather to the California poet Robinson Jeffers. Milosz believes that Jeffers was not taken seriously by his contemporaries because he tried to break through an “invisible web of censorship.” “One must recall that he was neglected by people who placed great value on meat, alcohol, comfortable houses, and luxurious cars, and tolerated words as if they were harmless hobbies” (VSF, 93).

Make Milosz’s work a mere exercise in autobiographical expression; make it an intriguing commentary on the vagaries of twentieth-century history; make it a convenient opportunity to express ringing support for Solidarity or to praise the remarkable range in modern poetry. But when Milosz says that the demonic is at the core of contemporary life, when he says that the highest function of discourse is exorcism or that poets should pray that “good spirits, not evil ones, choose us for their instruments”—surely he must be speaking figuratively. It would be indecorous to take him at his word. Such a way of talking must be for a man so sophisticated, sensitive, accomplished, only a harmless hobby.

*Visions of San Francisco Bay* could have been the title of one of those lovely coffetable books produced by the Sierra Club perhaps, filled with Ansel Adams photographs of the earthly paradise. Milosz does find much to praise in the western American landscape. Yet, even as he praises it, he confesses that there is “something oppressive in the virginity of this country” (8). He values the splendid landscapes for making him experience oppression.

One of the poets with whom Milosz was associated in Poland during World War II, Mieczyslaw Jastrun, wrote in 1944: “And far more hostile, more indifferent / Than all that common and inhuman grave / Is the beauty of the earth” (HPL, 461). The hostile beauty of



the earth is central to *Visions of San Francisco Bay*. In Death Valley, in the Sierras, in a redwood forest where eagles circle above chasms of mist, Milosz sees an alien, inhuman place, something neither good nor bad, however tempted we might be to find comfort in its physical beauty. Such a place can be used as a “screen where people’s inner hells and heavens are projected”—but in itself it is only a “chaos which dispenses with valuation” (VSF, 10).

The European landscape can easily be imagined as humane, as but a stage for human strivings, shaped by human values. The American West does not permit such comforting delusions. “Both here, on the West Coast, and everywhere in America, one is faced with something that is impossible to define by allusions to the ‘humanistically formed imagination,’ something incomprehensible in regard both to the forms taken in by the eye and to the connection those forms have to the lives of human beings” (8). If we wince at this, Milosz assures us that he winces too. Yet he insists that in this discomfort we are coming close to the heart of the European immigrant experience, which is so often romanticized. “People decided to leave their villages in the same spirit as a man considers suicide; they weighed everything, then went off into the unknown, but once there, they were seized by a despair unlike anything they had ever experienced in the old country” (42). They had, if unwillingly, broken through the cocoon of constantly renewed interdependencies that shielded them from the real world. In America they could for the first time see it for what it was, in and of itself, an alien and indifferent thing. They could taste “the elixir of pure alienation” and in their loneliness perceive the human condition.

Or this at least seems to have been Milosz’s own experience: “Now I seek shelter in these pages, but my humanistic zeal has been weakened by the mountains and the ocean, by those many moments when I have gazed upon boundless immensities with a feeling akin to nausea, the wind ravaging my little homestead of hopes and intentions” (11). But Milosz himself, like any human being, and unlike the impersonal force called nature, cannot and will not dispense with valuation. An indifferent universe is to him an evil universe. He finds



precedent for this dark conclusion in the old Manichean heresy which taught that the little good in this world was trapped here as if in exile, yearning for escape. This conclusion Milosz finds empirically confirmed not just in the horrors of modern history but in the teaching of modern evolutionary biology:

Obviously, the struggle with Evil in the Universe is an old one; the Manicheans were among the first who refused to believe such a miserable world could issue from the hands of a God who was good . . . Yet, never was the position of those who defend the idea of a hidden harmony more difficult, never was Manichean ferocity more aggressive than when the nineteenth century observed that the suffering of living matter is the mainspring of its Movement and that the individual creature is sacrificed in the name of a splendid and enormous transformation without goal or purpose. (23–24)

Some species rise, others fall, as do human families, nations, and whole civilizations. There may well be an internal logic to these transformations, a logic that when viewed from sufficient distance has its own elegance, harmony, and grace. Our reason tempts us to be enthralled by this superhuman splendor; but when so enthralled we find it difficult to remember, except perhaps as an element in an abstract calculus, the millions of individuals, the millions upon millions, who unwillingly paid for this splendor with pain and blood.

The call of nature—survival of the fittest—and the call of history—the strong do what they will, the weak what they must—are a single song, a siren song that would have us lose our sense of “dread and repugnance for the impersonal cruelty built into the structure of the universe.” This song governs our world: “The fear of hell-fire has not vanished; hell . . . has taken root in our very subjugation to and helplessness against the natural forces residing in us, which today are the domain of the biologist, doctor, scientist, psychiatrist” (24). Hell is the subjection of the human to the inhuman, of the personal to the impersonal, of the living to the dead, of the concrete to the abstract. In hell the elemental wonder at mere existence is lost; everything becomes a case, an instance, a symptom. So we must not mistake



systematic philosophy or science for allies in our struggle against the inhuman, for they by their very nature attempt to reduce the world to abstractions.

For Milosz philosophical systems are worth studying only in order to dismiss them. And science? “Had I a liking for the sciences, perhaps only a sociology which examines the self-confident social sciences would satisfy me. Fortunately, I do not, for I would then have used the garb of a scientific shaman to conceal my own preferences and biases” (63).

But what of the great achievements of technology, which at least in its benign applications has alleviated human suffering and otherwise made human beings less dependent on the vicissitudes of nature? About even these achievements Milosz has deep doubts. He suggests that this could well be the subtlest deception of the demonic. “The greatest trick of this continent’s demons, their leisurely vengeance, consists in surrendering nature, recognizing that it could not be defended; but in place of nature there arose that civilization which to its members appears to be Nature itself, endowed with nearly all the features of that other nature” (68).

The superhuman landscape has been conquered only by a superhuman technology—but this conquest proves pyrrhic. The technology itself now dwarfs the individual into inconsequence, and far more effectively because now we are being dwarfed by the products of our own collectivity. We feel reduced to “impotence, evasion, a solitude with phonograph music and a fire in the fireplace” (68). Unless, that is, we are willing to assert what seems absurd, both to others and to ourselves: what we must assert is the primacy of the concrete, the personal, however ephemeral or inconsequential that may seem to our mind’s eye. A landscape viewed from an airplane may well look like an image on a television screen. From such heights our perceptions suffer from ontological anemia. But even viewing such a washed-out scene, we can vivify it, though it becomes horrifying: “This continent is desolate, the skin of an antediluvian beast, flaxen, bluish, yellow, sometimes furry with forests” (67).

Milosz prefers to see the continent this way, as a real thing—and



he claims to offer his preferences as merely personal. He does not aim to prove them true because proof always involves abstractions, and the devil always wins at his own game. But Milosz can continue to assert unyieldingly his preferences against the devil and his syllogisms, even at the risk of embarrassing his reader and himself in his persistent use of the outmoded language of demonology. If the world sacrifices the individual with apparent indifference, if reality seems governed by abstract laws, who is responsible for such a travesty? There must be agents behind all this, certain living creatures who are devoted to deluding us—and these agents have traditionally been denominated as evil spirits.

Milosz, when it involves him in what seems patent defiance of common sense, always strives to speak the language of the concrete, the personal. It is the language of poetry and essay: “The only thing we can do is try to communicate with one another” (5). Communicating our concrete presence, our uniqueness, will help us to resist the seductive voices of the demonic: “Whenever I take up my pen, which itself pretends to knowledge, since language is composed of affirmations and negations, I treat that act only as the exorcism of the evil spirits of the present” (226). Language will, left to itself, pretend to knowledge and reduce the concrete to propositions. Hence it must be handled with a certain recognition of danger. Language is a contradiction, at once sound and idea, just human beings are at once person and organism. And so Milosz begins his poem “*Ars Poetica?*”: “I have always aspired 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” (BW, 30). Such a communication of individuality or uniqueness is not possible except through the mediation of a language full of claims. The communication can be achieved only by turning this language against itself, by irony, by self-contradiction, and by the sublime agony of attempting to transcend the very language. There is no art of poetry except one that ends in a question mark.

Much of culture, much of the invisible web of censorship, is meant to “mask man’s fundamental duality” (VSF, 53): to mask the duality



and thereby free people from the necessity of choice. Milosz's work is devoted to unmasking that duality; he wants to make his readers admit the contradictory nature of their own experience. Milosz agrees with Simone Weil that contradiction is the lever of transcendence. Contradiction forces us to assert our preferences as preferences, to make an "arbitrary choice, not subject to verification." We must recognize that we are living within the contradiction; it is not a "background against which to play out our tragicomedies" (29). Our personalism, our humanism, if such we choose, will scarcely be comforting. It will be a "piety without a home," which "fortunately, allows me no safe superiority" (34). (Superiority would come only if we knew we were right.) Perhaps this half-ironic piety is best summarized in the title of one essay: "An Essay in Which the Author Confesses That He Is on the Side of Man, for Lack of Anything Better."

Actually he also confesses that he is on the side of God, who presumably is somewhat better. But Milosz's is not the God of philosophers or theologians. "I desire a God . . . who would love me and help me in misfortune, who would save me from the nothingness of death, to whom I could each day render homage and gratitude. God should have a beard and stroll the heavenly pastures" (77). Only a thoroughly anthropomorphic religion can resist "the exact sciences which annihilate the individual" (82).

Even the summary of *Visions* we have just presented does in one important respect violate the spirit of the book. To say that the choice for Milosz is a choice between the abstract and the concrete, between logic and contradiction, is to state the choice wrongly, because it is an abstraction. The choice for Milosz is never between ideas, world views, or philosophies; it is always between persons. At the cosmic level Milosz may think the choice is between a bearded God and sophisticated demons. But in the small world of *Visions from San Francisco Bay* it is a choice between Milosz himself and the great, neglected Robinson Jeffers.

Jeffers in his way was as unyielding as Milosz. He saw essentially the same contradictions as Milosz, the same dualities at the heart of