

THE  
WITNESS  
OF *poetry*

C Z E S L A W  
MIŁOŚZ





# The Witness of Poetry

Czeslaw Milosz

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Zgubiło się pokolenie. Także miasta. Narody.  
Ale to trochę później. Tymczasem w oknie jaskółka.  
Odprawia obrzęd sekundy. Ten chłopiec, czy już podejrzewa  
Że piękność zawsze nie tu i zawsze kłamliwa?  
Teraz widzi swoje powiaty. Koszą otawy.  
Drogi kręte, pod górę, w dół. Borki. Jeziora.  
Pochmurne niebo z jednym ukośnym promieniem.  
I wszędzie rzędy kosiarzy w koszulach z grubego płótna,  
W ciemnoniebieskich spodniach, barwionych wedle zwyczaju.  
Widzi co widzę dotychczas. Był jednak przebiegły,  
Patrzył jakby od razu rzeczy zmieniała pamięć.  
Odwracał się jadąc bryką bo chciał najwięcej zachować.  
To znaczy zbierał co trzeba na jakiś ostatni moment  
Kiedy z okruchów ułoży świat już doskonały.

My generation was lost. Cities too. And nations.  
But all this a little later. Meanwhile, in the window, a swallow  
Performs its rite of the second. That boy, does he already suspect  
That beauty is always elsewhere and always delusive?  
Now he sees his homeland. At the time of the second mowing.  
Roads winding uphill and down. Pine groves. Lakes.  
An overcast sky with one slanting ray.  
And everywhere men with scythes, in shirts of unbleached linen  
And the dark-blue trousers that were common in the province.  
He sees what I see even now. Oh but he was clever,  
Attentive, as if things were instantly changed by memory.  
Riding in a cart, he looked back to retain as much as possible.  
Which means he knew what was needed for some ultimate moment  
When he would compose from fragments a world perfect at last.

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I

# Starting from My Europe



**M**ANY learned books on poetry have been written, and they find, at least in the countries of the West, more readers than does poetry itself. This is not a good sign, even if it may be explained both by the brilliance of their authors and by their zeal in assimilating scientific disciplines which today enjoy universal respect. A poet who would like to compete with those mountains of erudition would have to pretend he possesses more self-knowledge than poets are allowed to have. Frankly, all my life I have been in the power of a daimonion, and how the poems dictated by him came into being I do not quite understand. That is the reason why, in my years of teaching Slavic literatures, I have limited myself to the history of literature, trying to avoid poetics.

Yet there is something that comforts me and justifies, I think, my presence in the chair of poetry at Harvard. I have in mind the corner of Europe that shaped me and to which I have remained faithful by writing in the language of my childhood. The twentieth century, perhaps more protean and multifaceted than any other, changes according to the point from which we view it, a point in the geographic sense as well. My corner of Europe, owing to the extraordinary and lethal events



that have been occurring there, comparable only to violent earthquakes, affords a peculiar perspective. As a result, all of us who come from those parts appraise poetry slightly differently from the majority of my audience, for we tend to view it as a witness and participant in one of mankind's major transformations. I have titled this book *The Witness of Poetry* not because we witness it, but because it witnesses us.

Both individuals and human societies are constantly discovering new dimensions accessible only to direct experience. This also applies to the historical dimension, which we apprehend unintentionally and even against our will. (It does not occur through books, even though historical experience does transform our reading.) By experience I mean not only feeling the direct pressure of History, with a capital H, in the form of fire falling from the sky, invasions by foreign armies, or ruined cities. Historicity may reveal itself in a detail of architecture, in the shaping of a landscape, even in trees like those oaks close to my birthplace which remember my pagan ancestors. Yet only an awareness of the dangers menacing what we love allows us to sense the dimension of time and to feel in everything we see and touch the presence of past generations.

I was born and grew up on the very borderline between Rome and Byzantium. Is it possible—one cannot help asking—to invoke today those ancient, no more than symbolic, powers? And yet that division has persisted for centuries, tracing a line, though not always on the map, between the domain of Roman Catholicism and that of Eastern Christianity. For centuries Europe maintained that old division and submitted to the law of parallel axes, a Western one which extended north from Italy and an Eastern one extending north from Byzantium. On my side of the border everything came from Rome: Latin as the language of the Church and of literature, the theological quarrels of the Middle Ages, Latin poetry as a model for the Renaissance poets, white churches in the baroque style. Also it was to the South, to Italy, that admirers of

arts and letters directed their longings. Now, as I try to say something sensible about poetry, these are far from abstract considerations. If one of my themes will be the strange fate of the religious imagination, as well as the fate of poetry when it began to acquire features of a substitute religion, it is precisely because in the *gymnasium* for several years I studied the history of the Roman Church and dogmatics from thick textbooks that have since been abandoned everywhere; I doubt whether such detailed books are used now even in seminaries. Also classicism, the subject of both my fascination and my dislike, has its origin in Horace, Vergil, and Ovid, whom I read and translated in class. In my lifetime Latin disappeared from the liturgy and from high-school curricula, as a result of a gradual weakening of the South-North axis. It would be too early, however, to relegate Rome and Byzantium to the irretrievable past, since their heritage constantly takes on new forms, often difficult to define.

I certainly felt a sense of menace from the East very early, and not from Eastern Christianity, of course, but from what had arisen as a result of its defeat. The law of the South-North axis was at work not only in the case of the barbarian peoples converted by Rome, but also in the vast territories that had taken religion from Byzantium: religion, but not the language of the Church. The Russian historian Georgy Fedotov sees the source of all Russia's misfortunes in its having chosen a Slavic idiom for its Church language instead of Greek, which could have become in the East an equivalent of the West's universal Latin. Russia was thus isolated for a long time until it suddenly and belatedly discovered Western ideas, giving them grotesque and ugly shapes. In Poland, which won the war of 1920 with revolutionary Russia and succeeded in preserving its independence until 1939, the feeling of danger was too elemental to require research into its historical causes. Nevertheless, my knowledge of the Russian language since childhood, as well as some non-Western elements in my own makeup, has

gradually led me to a reflection on Russian messianism and its holy city, Moscow, a city once called the third Rome (which fact has not been without consequences). Thus my interest in Dostoevsky, whose name I will pronounce here quite often, results to a large extent from geography.

The South-North axis. The language of the Polish poets of the sixteenth century, like the language of the newly translated bibles, both Catholic and Protestant, is closer to today's Polish than the language of *The Faerie Queene* is to today's English. Or, if you prefer, it is closer in tone and sensibility. This means that a Polish poet has a more intimate relationship with his predecessors in the poetic craft and feels at home in the sixteenth century. But the most eminent among those poets, Jan Kochanowski, was bilingual; he wrote a number of poems in Latin, and many of his Polish poems are just adaptations from Horace. A Polish poet is thus constantly reminded of that very professional question: what should be done today with classicism?

The notion of the South-North axis is, I hope, clear enough. Another notion, the West-East axis, is perhaps more exotic, though not for readers of *War and Peace*, for instance, where the heroes, well-educated Russians, happily converse in French. In the eighteenth century French becomes, after Latin, the second universal language of Europe, and this time Russia was included in its range. In provincial East and Central European capitals a myth was born, of Paris, the capital of the world. The eyes of devout Catholics might still have been turned to Rome, the capital of the papacy. But the enlightened, the worldly, the chasers of fashion, all wanted to know what had just happened in Parisian intellectual salons. France exported in succession its philosophers, its revolution, war under Napoleon, then its novel, and finally a revolution in poetry and painting: symbolism, cubism, fauvism, surrealism. Now all this seems to be a period closed or approaching its close, for, just as Latin disappeared from the churches and schools, fewer and fewer of Europe's young people consider it worth-

while, even for the sake of snobbery, to learn French. Yet the modern poetry of many European countries can be understood only if we keep in mind a fusion of two metals—one of native origin, the other imported from Paris.

The literary map of Europe, as it presented itself to the West, contained until recently numerous blank spots. England, France, Germany, and Italy had a definite place, but the Iberian peninsula was no more than a vague outline; Holland, Belgium, and Scandinavia were blurred; while to the east of Germany the white space could have easily borne the inscription *Ubi leones* (Where the lions are), and that domain of wild beasts included such cities as Prague (mentioned sometimes because of Kafka), Warsaw, Budapest, and Belgrade. Only farther to the east does Moscow appear on the map. The images preserved by a cultural elite undoubtedly also have political significance as they influence the decisions of the groups that govern, and it is no wonder that the statesmen who signed the Yalta agreement so easily wrote off a hundred million Europeans from these blank areas in the loss column. Perhaps it was then that a definite break occurred on the West-East axis, and Parisian intellectuals, used to having their ideas and books admired for their universality beyond the Vistula, the Dnieper, and the Danube, woke up to find themselves sentenced to provincialism. They started to search for some compensation on the other side of the Atlantic, where, however, their involuted style and thought did not find many followers, even at the universities.

In my youth, apprentices in poetry, if they came from the blank spots on the map, had to undergo a short or a longer period of training in Paris. That was the case with me, strengthened by some family precedent, for a relative of mine, a distant cousin, Oscar Milosz, brought up in France, was a French poet. Arriving in Paris as a young man, I later had many opportunities to wonder at the contrast between the radical changes occurring in myself and in my geographical zone to the east of Germany, on the one hand, and the perfect stability

and the continuity in the life of *la ville lumière* on the other. Half a century later I wrote a poem on that subject, which better explains what I just said than does my prose.

**BYPASSING RUE DESCARTES**

Bypassing rue Descartes

I descended toward the Seine, shy, a traveler,

A young barbarian just come to the capital of the world.

We were many, from Jassy and Koloshvar, Wilno and Bucharest, Saigon and Marrakesh,

Ashamed to remember the customs of our homes,

About which nobody here should ever be told:

The clapping for servants, barefoot girls hurry in,

Dividing food with incantations,

Choral prayers recited by masters and household together.

I had left the cloudy provinces behind,

I entered the universal, dazzled and desiring.

Soon enough, many from Jassy and Koloshvar, or Saigon or Marrakesh

Were killed because they wanted to abolish the customs of their homes.

Soon enough, their peers were seizing power

In order to kill in the name of the universal beautiful ideas.

Meanwhile, the city behaved in accordance with its nature,

Rustling with throaty laughter in the dark,

Baking long breads and pouring wine into clay pitchers,

Buying fish, lemons and garlic at street markets,

Indifferent as it was to honor and shame and greatness and glory,

Because that had been done and transformed itself

Into monuments representing nobody knows whom,

Into arias hardly audible and into turns of speech.

Again I lean on the rough granite of the embankment,

As if I had returned from travels through the underworlds

And suddenly saw in the light the reeling wheel of the seasons

Where empires have fallen and those once living are now dead.

There is no capital of the world, neither here nor anywhere else,  
And the abolished customs are restored to their small fame,  
And I know the time of human generations is not like the time  
of the earth.

As to my heavy sins, I remember one most vividly:  
How, one day, walking a forest path along a stream,  
I pushed a rock down onto a water snake coiled in the grass.

And what I have met with in life was the just punishment  
Which reaches, sooner or later, everyone who breaks a taboo.

Though universal ideas long ago lost their appeal for those of us from Wilno, Warsaw, or Budapest, this does not mean they lost their appeal everywhere. The young cannibals who, in the name of inflexible principles, butchered the population of Cambodia had graduated from the Sorbonne and were simply trying to implement the philosophic ideas they had learned. As for ourselves, since we had seen firsthand what one achieves by violating, in the name of doctrine, local mores (that is everything which grows slowly, organically, for centuries), we could only think with horror about the absurdities haunting the human mind, indifferent as it is to the repetitive character of blunders.

The poem I read has a few themes. Its main layer is a confession, an avowal of grave sin. Not because to kill any living creature is evil—but because I come from Lithuania where the water snake was considered holy. Bowls of milk were set out for them at the thresholds of peasants' huts. People associated them with fertility, fertility of the soil and of the family, and the Sun loved the water snake. There is a Lithuanian folk saying: "Do not leave a dead *zaltys* on a field; bury it. The sight of a dead *zaltys* would cause the sun to cry."\*

Certainly, the student who wrote his French compositions zealously and read Paul Valéry should not have had much in

\* Quoted by Marija Gimbutas in "Ancient Symbolism in Lithuanian Folk Art," *Memoirs of the American Folklore Society*, 49 (Philadelphia, 1958).



common with the cult of snakes. And yet the superstitious side of my nature was and is stronger than the universal ideas, at least on the level where poetry is born. Though Roman Catholicism inculcated me with a permanent sense of sin, perhaps another, more primitive, pagan notion proved to be stronger, that of guilt from violation of the sacred.

I do not intend to go too far in stressing such provincial exoticism. One of the strangest regularities to be taken into account by a historian of literature and art is the affinity binding people who live at the same time in countries distant from one another. I am even inclined to believe that the mysterious substance of time itself determines the similarities of a given historical moment even between civilizations not in communication. Such a thesis may appear farfetched; let me therefore limit myself to Europe. There the mark of a common style binds contemporaneous poets writing in various languages, which may be explained by an elusive osmosis and not necessarily by direct borrowings. But borrowings have been common. For instance, at the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a Frenchman was able to read a poem on the ruins of Rome signed Joachim du Bellay; a Pole knew the same poem as the work of Mikołaj Sęp-Szarzyński; a Spaniard, as the work of Francesco de Quevedo; while the true author, whom the others adapted without scruple, was a little-known Latin humanist, Ianus Vitalis of Palermo. The acceleration of exchanges made the osmosis and mutual borrowings among the poets of the twentieth century obvious, so that Warsaw or Budapest, or my Wilno, was not outside a certain circuit. Even in distant New York, the literary groups of the nineteen-thirties, with their leftism, Marxism, and "literature for the masses," faithfully repeated the main concerns of the literati in my province. Besides, literary New York was composed mostly of immigrants from Eastern and Central Europe.

In addition to the South-North and West-East axes, there is a third I would like to discuss: the Past-Future axis. In our time

we have quite often heard that poetry is a palimpsest that, when properly decoded, provides testimony to its epoch. Such an assertion is correct, however—on condition that it not be applied in the manner preferred by Marxist-oriented schools of sociology, including the sociology of literature. Having spent time in the limbo of social doctrines, I know their sterility too well to return to them here, even though I did once observe them being applied most ingeniously—and comically—in the quarrels of the Polish avant-garde of the twenties over which kind of rhyme is socialist. I do not doubt, though, that posterity will read us in an attempt to comprehend what the twentieth century was like, just as we learn much about the nineteenth century from the poems of Rimbaud and the prose of Flaubert.

Clearly I am reflecting upon what sort of testimony about our century is being established by poetry, though I realize we are still submerged in our time and our judgments should be assessed in advance as uncertain. Let me approach this topic in a roundabout manner beginning with Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute* and a film by Ingmar Bergman with the same title, a film that better perhaps than any other demonstrates what film art is capable of, especially now when its technical perfection is primarily used to debase man. *The Magic Flute* introduces us to a climate so radically different from that in which we live that the very contrast between the aura of the late eighteenth century and that of our time is instructive. The libretto of the Mozart opera deals with a struggle between the darkness of obscurantism and the light of reason; the sacred and the rational are not separated, for the Temple, in other words, the Freemasonic lodge, bestows sacral features on the human mind in search of Wisdom. That Wisdom, besides, was conceived in various ways, as exemplified by the proliferation throughout the eighteenth century of "mystical lodges," convincingly presented in a classical work on the subject, *Les Sources occultes du romantisme* by Auguste Viatte. In *The Magic*

*Flute* man wins access to the Temple after he passes through trials and initiations. Those who do not succumb to the treacherous charms of the Queen of the Night will find themselves among the chosen few united by a common purpose, sharing knowledge about how to secure happiness for the people. The opera, let us note, had its premiere in Vienna in 1791, the year when a constitution was voted in Warsaw, and that too was the work of Freemasons and one of the offshoots of the French Revolution.

The people of that period seem to breathe confidence and hope, as well as faith in the approach of a new era for humanity; for some it seemed a millennium. Many of them would lose their heads on the guillotine. Others would follow Napoleon, experiencing his defeat as the end of all hope for a long time. Still others would write programs of utopian socialism. All of them, though, were animated by the renewed and secularized idea expressed quite early by a medieval monk, Joachim di Fiore, who divided history into three epochs: the epoch of the Father, the epoch of the Son, and the epoch to come, of the Spirit.

Even today it is still not clear what, in fact, the phenomenon called romanticism was, especially since the term does not mean the same in England and on the Continent and, moreover, means different things in different European countries. Romantic poetry is the very core of Polish literature. I grew up and completed my studies in the city of Wilno where Polish romanticism was born, probably not by chance, considering the peculiar character of the Lithuanian capital. In my youth it continued to be a city of churches and of Freemasonic lodges, and it seemed that the carriage of Napoleon, who had passed through in his march on Moscow, had departed only yesterday. My elder university colleagues—elder by a hundred years—founded secret organizations of the initiated, like that in *The Magic Flute*. One of them became the greatest of Polish poets, and I consider myself, of course, his disciple. I have