

A Farewell to Czeslaw Milosz

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Czeslaw Milosz was a legend for several generations, including my own. His poems were like forbidden fruit, as they were very hard to come by, and thus had an extraordinary flavor. Familiarity with those poems was like a password among Polish dissidents. We recognized each other through quotations from Milosz: without fear one could have a beer with someone who knew Milosz's poetry. His books, in those gray covers characteristic of the Paris-based émigré publishing house Kultura, were the most sought-after goods in the Polish intellectual market. *The Light of Day*, *The Captive Mind*, *Native Realm*, *A Poetic Treatise*, *Continents*, *Private Obligations*, *A Man Among Scorpions*, *A View of San Francisco Bay*, *The Land Of Ulro* -- all of these were our required reading, devoured and read to the last page in the milieu of the democratic opposition. These books were fascinating, but also disquieting. We, anti-Communist rebels, intuitively felt that Milosz, unlike us, was fighting on many fronts. Not only did he argue with Soviet communism and with the hypocrisy of the contesting left in the west, but he was also an unconditionally harsh judge of the Polish tradition of thoughtless blimperiness or totalitarian nationalism. His writings on the interwar period -- on relations with the ethnic minorities, on the poverty of the Polish right and the hypocrisy of the Polish left, on anti-Semitism, on the primitive aggression of clericalism, but also on the insincerity of the governing elites of the time -- these were a call to rethink anew the principles of Polish culture, of Polish spirituality. Hence Czeslaw Milosz -- author of *The Captive Mind* -- was a teacher who helped to free Poles' captive minds.

Milosz was shaped by a then truly multi-cultural Poland, and more specifically by the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, itself a land of diverse nations, cultures, languages, and religions. That Poland was already dying before his eyes in the 1930s, and it was from that time that he began to feel himself an émigré, a refugee, and a man whose motherland had been confiscated. Politics bored and disgusted him, but he knew it was impossible to escape politics in times when the "Spirit of History" spoke the language of totalitarian oppression. The price for doing it was to become an opportunist and a liar:

When from cowardice grows indifference,
From indifference to crime, a silence,
From silence only death and indictment.
[from *My Mother's Grave*]

I was fortunate to have known Czeslaw Milosz for almost 30 years. I first met him in 1976 in Paris, but of course I already knew his poetry and essays. As a fifteen-year-old boy I played hooky in the National Library to read his books, since they could not be obtained anywhere else. I must say that I owe an exceptional debt to those readings. When I sometimes wonder what good I could say on my behalf on Judgment Day, I repeat to myself that I belonged to a narrow circle of people who made the decision to publish a writer -- whose works and even whose name were banned -- through the illegal independent publishing house NOVA. When Milosz was honored in 1980 with the Nobel Prize, we could proudly claim to have been his only publisher in the country.

But then in 1976, in Paris, nobody dreamt that Milosz might get a Nobel. I met him through Jerzy Giedroyc and Zygmunt Hertz at the offices of Kultura, and he honored me with an invitation to supper. We agreed to meet in the Latin Quarter, where the poet took quite a while to find a certain restaurant. He looked around, took wrong turns, got lost, and finally found it. It was a small, cozy Bulgarian restaurant. We sat down, Milosz ordered wine, and said, "This is exactly where I wanted to bring you. I came here every day in the early 50s, and every day I thought that that was the day I would commit suicide."

The conversation was long and fascinating. At some point, more or less after the third bottle of wine, I began to recite -- remarkably, without stuttering -- his poems. I knew many of them by heart. I was deeply surprised to notice tears on the poet's cheeks. Taken aback, I stopped reciting. And then I heard the emotional voice of the poet: "I didn't expect young people in Poland to know my poems by heart. I thought I'd been condemned."

He had good reason to think that way. He was "confiscated" with exceptional consistency, as though the Communists wanted to prove that their vengefulness had no limits. In Poland's Universal Encyclopedia, under his name one found Czeslaw Milosz described as "an enemy of the Polish People's Republic." Fortunately his own phrase from the poem "A Toast" was proven right again: that "the man of letters outlives his betters." His "betters" -- the officials and dignitaries who condemned Milosz to nonexistence -- have themselves long since sunk into nonexistence, while Milosz's words still sound and shine with unblemished beauty.

I saw Milosz many times: in Warsaw during his memorable visit in the summer of 1981; and then in Budapest, in California, in Mexico, in Krakow, and again in Paris. The conversations were always fascinating and intense. Talking with Milosz, I was aware of the fact that I was interacting with someone extraordinary. He had about him a strange magnetism, some hidden gift of greatness, which did not prevent his relations with friends from being affectionate, direct, and modest. He was also loyal and devoted, and I shall never forget what he did for me when I was in prison: he not only organized various protests in support of political prisoners, and graciously accepted on my behalf in New York an honorary degree from the New School for Social Research, but above all he wrote a moving introduction to a book of mine published in the United States. This introduction granted me a kind of legitimization and credibility. I was then unknown in the States, a prisoner under martial law, and Milosz, after all, was already a Nobel Laureate. Indeed, Czeslaw Milosz knew how to be generous beyond all expectations.

And not so long ago, already in a new era, when a well-known priest from Gdansk honored me with anti-Semitic sputum, Czeslaw Milosz responded in the pages of *Tygodnik Powszechny* with a voice of concern and dignity. Czeslaw decided that he had to speak up on a public matter, even though he deeply disliked such manifestations. When I thanked him for all that, he shrugged his shoulders, saying with a smile, "That's how it is between friends, Adam".

His whole life he carried within himself a sense of guilt and duty. He paid debts all the time: to the excluded and unfortunate, to Polish literature and the conquered Baltic states, to poets killed in the Warsaw Uprising, to the murdered in Katyn, to the condemned Jews, and to the destiny which endowed him with the voice of a witness and the vision of a prophet. He wondered:

What is poetry which does not save
Nations or people?
A connivance with official lies,
A song of drunkards whose throats will be cut in a moment,
Readings for sophomore girls.
[from *Dedication*, Warsaw 1945]

But he was not sure about this conclusion. He sometimes deleted the poem from the collection, and sometimes put it back. He knew, after all, that poetry does not have to save; that it can simply offer beauty. His poems often take us to the deep lakes and wild forests of his native Lithuania, inhabited by sacred frogs, darting fish, gleaming colors, and rich in tales and songs.

No one else has told the world or us Poles with such color, sincerity, and merciless honesty the story of our familial Europe, our native realm. No one else has made us so sharply aware of the fact that we live among the unsolvable dilemmas and irreconcilable contradictions in which the truth of the world becomes apparent. He knew how to tell this truth with affection and courage. Truly, Czeslaw Milosz brought us kingly gifts. q

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