Czeslaw Milosz's Poetry, or a Primer on Eastern Europe

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When an American reads one of the great poets of the Western world, he approaches that poet with a sizeable satchel of knowledge at his disposal. There is in the satchel a veritable encyclopedia of history and social mores, judgments, emotions, and images. Shakespeare and Dante, Rousseau and Goethe come to us reinforced by that information which makes reading into a modification of an already familiar order. We feel comfortable rearranging that order and inserting an additional part into it. In contrast, the reading of a Chinese poet makes us a bit uncomfortable and unsure of our reactions. We do not see behind that poet the familiar architecture of faces or the common heritage of thought and custom.

Even Russian culture, the only non-Western culture created by the white man, enjoys the advantage of a familiar aura. An educated American knows enough about tsars and commissars, St. Petersburg and Moscow, to make the reading of novels by Tolstoy and Dostoevsky into a rediscovery of vaguely familiar places and ideas.

The same cannot be said of 200 million Europeans who live in territories between Germany and Russia. Occasionally a name or a book coming from that vast belt of nations captures the American imagination, only to fall into oblivion a generation later. Such was the case with the Nobel prize winner Henryk Sienkiewicz, a Pole who was *the* best selling foreign author in America at the turn of the century. By and large, Poles, Czechs, Hungarians and other East Europeans could still be described in Neville Chamberlain's words, as inhabitants of far-away countries of whom we know nothing.[1]

It is against this general lassitude of will and knowledge in regard to Eastern Europe that my essay will try to proceed. My topic is Czeslaw Milosz's poetry. One could speak of Milosz as just another Nobel Prize winner deserving of textual explication. But, as Derek Walcott said after receiving the 1992 Nobel Prize for Literature, through him the entire region of the West Indies was honored. Similarly, I believe that it was not only Milosz who was recognized by the Nobel Prize Committee in 1980, but also the language, the nation, and the elusive *ethnie* (culture and mode of thought)[2] which gave him intellectual support and shaped his outlook and habits even while he rebelled against them. I am speaking both of the Polish language and Polish national identity and of that peculiar ethnic identity which may simply be described as East European, characterized by the strongly felt European ties and cognizance of one's status as Europe's bastard child.

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But here lies the irony. By temperament Milosz is a wanderer who takes in the world and tries to describe it. He is a quintessential anti-nationalist and he strongly dislikes preachers. Like another Polish poet, Jan Lechon, in spring he wanted to see "Spring, and not Poland."[3] Milosz was destined to become a spokesman in spite of his best efforts to avoid such a role. "I would like to be a poet of the five senses," he said.[4] But his country, Poland, that "apolitical and defenseless land,"[5] was caught between the two empires intent on devouring each other. Thus Milosz became a reluctant witness.

But not a full-time witness. His true passion is still to proclaim the importance of the physical world, to describe, to be the "secretary" (325) of things: "It seems I was called for this: / To glorify things just because they are."[6] He is a poet of material objects and persons, birds, streets, houses, and trees, the paraphernalia of living which surround us and which we barely notice in our life full of strain and care. Milosz writes of "apple trees, a river, the bend of a road. . . " (111), of "ladies of 1920 who served us cocoa. . ." (376), of "The shape of lips, of eyelids, a warm touch." His poetry overflows with wonderment that "in spite of the cataclysms life goes on."[7]

The fascination with what *is*, with the nature of things, and with the gift of physical existence is a continuing motif in Milosz's poetry. To understand Milosz, it is good to recall Geoffrey Chaucer's "Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote / The droghte of March hath perced to the roote, / And bathed every veyne in swich licour / Of which vertu engendred is the flour. . . . And smale foweles maken melodye, / That slepen al the nyght with open ye. . . ." Chaucer's realism is of the same kind as Milosz's. It shows the dependence of man on the commonplace physical world to which everyone has access; it acts against the modern myth of man's self-sufficiency, of his lordship over nature, the universe, and himself. In "Caffé Greco," describing a meeting with a friend in a café in Rome, Milosz thus characterizes himself: "And for me: amazement / That the city of Rome stands, that we meet again. / That I still exist for a moment, myself and the swallows" (457). In "Gift" he says: "A day so happy . . . 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 . . . . / When straightening up, I saw the blue sea and sails" (251).

To be sure, Milosz is miles away from Chaucer's innocence, and his gladness is all too often tempered by the remembrance of the horrors that "seasoned his youth." But his affirmation of the here and now indicates that, like Chaucer, he is to a large extent a Thomistic poet. He is generally skeptical of the Cartesian universe, ambivalent in regard to Hegel (he accepted Hegel in his youth, however), and invariably sarcastic in regard to those "learned in the spirit of history" who affect the "collapse" of the word *is* and "ascension to power" of the word *becomes*. (115) In "Magpiety," he says, "amazed: What is magpiety? If magpiety does not exist / My nature does not exist either" (120).

The poet insists that we turn our attention to the seemingly insignificant details of the human pilgrimage, for in them the secret meaning of an epoch is expressed. In a cycle of poems inspired by nineteenth-century painters, he characteristically sees the noncentral figures rather than those referred to in the names of paintings. In contemplating J.M.W. Turner's *Chateaux de St. Michel in Savoy* he bypasses the splendid castles and turns his attention to the peasant woman "in the red / Skirt, a black bodice, a white / Blouse . . ." carrying laundry to the stream.[8] In John Constable's *The Young Waltonians—Stratford Mill* he sees a group

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of poor boys in "patched trousers, patched shirts / As well as their dream of escaping from the village." The conventional interpretation of Constable's painting evokes the picturesque aspect of rural life, but Milosz ignores it and inquires instead why the boys are so restless. In Jean-Baptiste Corot's *Port in La Rochelle* he sees human toil rather than harmony. The background figures busying themselves with daily routines, perhaps struggling to make a living in an incipient consumerist society, are for him the most interesting element of that painting. We are left with the suggestion that, all too often, Western art has treated human work as a mere compositional element, an aesthetic experience rather than a spiritual or economic one. While reading Milosz's deliberately iconoclastic interpretations of the great and "peaceful" painters of the nineteenth century, one wonders whether perhaps that Romantic quality which the paintings capture so well was not in itself a false path, a wrong solution burdened with unintended consequences.

Milosz started writing poetry, I think, just as many others did. He knew his way with words, he was ambitious, curious, persistent; and being a poet was a time-honored way of becoming a "somebody" in Poland, a country which, as Norman Davies rightly said, thrives on constantly being in crisis. Then came World War II and its results, and Milosz became a man acquainted with grief. It is not that survivorship entailed a feeling of guilt—rather, it burdened the survivors with a sense of responsibility well beyond the power of an individual to bear. I think Milosz has felt this sense of responsibility, as attested by his numerous and very restrained poems and statements about World War II and the Soviet-Nazi occupation of Poland.

A good part of Milosz's poetry is devoted to the squaring of accounts with Europe. Born in what in 1911 was a heavily Polonized part of Lithuania, raised in the free Polish Republic which was soon to be torn apart by the two neighbors while the West yawned, he spent most of his adulthood in France and the United States. Thus he was able to experience firsthand, as few have, the truth of the saying that "ideas have consequences."

Skepticism about the path which Europe has taken in the last two centuries permeates Milosz's entire *opus*. Milosz views Europe from the perspective of Eastern Europe, i.e., as someone who cannot help clinging to his Western spiritual heritage even as he knows that he has been cheated of his inheritance. "Treasure your legacy of skills, child of Europe. . . . Learn to predict a fire with unerring precision, / Then burn the house down to fulfill the prediction . . . . Grow your tree of falsehood from a small grain of truth . . . let your lie be even more logical than the truth itself" (86). These are harsh words, but they refer to a continent that allowed Nazism and Communism to devour much of its people while the intellectuals either looked the other way or, in the case of Communism, nodded approvingly. Unlike many an armchair conservative of our own day, Milosz is plagued by an understanding of Europe's failure. In "Child of Europe," he says bitterly: "We [who were] saved by our cunning and knowledge . . . are better than those who perished." Keenly aware of the many skeletons hidden in the closets of the successful European states, he bluntly charges: "The dark blush of anger / the impolite reply / the loathing of foreigners / uphold the State" (173). He seems to be fascinated by the intense desire to survive displayed by the Western European states for centuries.

We are approaching here that element of Milosz's poetry which is perhaps least comprehensible to the Western mind: his obsession with the disappearance of cities and countries, with the tearing down of the social fabric in ways unimag-

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inable in the peaceful West unaccustomed to an all-out invasion of an alien civilization since the times of the Huns and the Vandals. "The house you approached trembling, / The apartment that dazzled you - Look, on this spot the cranes clear the rubble" (*Provinces*, 30). This refers to the 1944 Warsaw rising when the city of one million inhabitants was turned into rubble. Milosz is forever marked by this relationship to those who have disappeared, and to places which "not long ago were celebrated as homelands [and now are merely parts of] States on the map" (290). He records the thin voice of a woman for whom the destruction of porcelain became an obsession after foreign tanks rolled over her house(83).

The survivor's anxiety is well known to those Americans who see in their Southern heritage the presence of those virtues which have since been scarce in both language and life: honor, fidelity, rectitude. Not that the South was overflowing with them; neither was Poland before it was invaded in 1939 by Russians and Germans. But as both Milosz and Faulkner knew, it is always the Sartorises who perish in large numbers while the Snopeses are elevated to representative status. After the defeat, says Milosz, "We were permitted to shriek in the tongue of dwarfs and demons / But pure and generous words were forbidden" (231).

One of Milosz's volumes of poetry is titled *City Without a Name*. It opens with a cry: "Who will honor a city without a name?" The title refers to the city of Milosz's youth, Wilno (now Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania). Before the Soviet invasion, it boasted one of the best Polish universities (which Milosz attended) and a fiercely patriotic Polish population. There was also a large Yiddish-speaking Jewish minority. Before World War I and throughout the nineteenth century, Wilno belonged to the Russian empire and was called Vilna, the name which entered the English language. Vilna was a seat of Jewish culture and an important publishing center for Yiddish and Hebrew. Thrown into the mix was a minority Belorussian population and, of course, the Lithuanians for whom the discovery of their national separateness came in late nineteenth century and who gave in to it wholeheartedly. Several of these national groups were ready to fight to keep Wilno-Vilnius-Vilna within the borders of their respective states. While they were readying themselves for that, in came the Soviets and, with the lists of names carefully prepared beforehand, thinned down the patriots of each and every nationality.[9] Milosz has tried to preserve this city in verse, in prose, even in his Nobel speech, which, unlike so many other speeches given by the Nobel laureates, did not offer solutions to the world's problems but instead spoke of the good fortune of having been raised in a small country where problems were palpable rather than abstract and where the idea of the "lonely crowd" was incomprehensible. In that speech he invoked the names of his schoolmates who perished, thus asking the familiar question, Why me? Why not the boy I shared the school bench with? I was given time to learn to make the fine distinctions. He was not.

The shadows of those who have not been given time to sort things out appear everywhere in Milosz's poetry, from the poems written in the 1940s to *Provinces* published in 1991. This last volume contains a poem about a certain "Mister Hanusevich" with funny ears who "had his estate somewhere near Minsk" and was in love with Nina. He and his Nina perished without a trace after the Soviet-Nazi pact of 1939. What fascinates Milosz is the ontological status of these two comical characters: since no one knows exactly how they perished, since their bodies were never presented for viewing in any funeral parlor, in what do they still

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exist? Elsewhere Milosz ponders the fate of a certain hunchback librarian, Miss Jadwiga, who died in a basement during the 1944 Warsaw rising. Then there is a certain Kazia, a child whom he met at a neighboring estate whose big white collar he remembers:

> Let us assume that she married, had a child, then was deported to Asia, starving, infested with lice, tried to save herself and the child, worked hard, discovering a dimension of existence which is better left in silence, for our notions of decency and morality have nothing to do with it. Let us assume she learned about the death of her husband in a gulag, found herself in Iran, had two husbands more, lived successively in Africa, in England, in America. . . (*Provinces*, 68)

Such poems of remembrance make the Eastern European poets dramatically different from their American counterparts, with the exception perhaps of the Southern poets whose relationship to things past is similarly ambivalent and painful. The difference between the standard American condemnation of the Soviet gulag and the perspective of a native of Eastern Europe is the latter is acutely aware of Europe's role in consigning its borderlands to be swallowed first by the Nazi and then by the Soviet colossus. Munich and Yalta symbolize that betrayal, and so does the subsequent cozying up to the Moscow regime practiced by virtually all Western governments in spite of the much-touted "Cold War." For there is a fundamental difference between home-bred revolutions and those brought in on the bayonets of foreign soldiers. Russia experienced the first, Eastern Europe, the second. Milosz expresses the perception of millions of Eastern Europeans in his invocation of "the Empire, / Which constantly marches westward, armed with bows, lariats, rifles, / Riding in a troika, pummeling the driver's back, / Or in a jeep, wearing fur hats, with a file full of conquered countries" (477). At the same time, he is very much aware of the supreme irony of the perception of Eastern Europe in today's America as a quarrelsome backwater, which is unable to rule itself and which should therefore be administered by some more "mature" nation to whose sphere of "legitimate interests" it belongs anyway. "And the grass will say: 'I do not know whether it really happened'" (*Utwory poetyckie: Poems*, 195). "The lips of the innocent make no claims" (208).

What he has seen and known has made him resistant to that smugness which almost inevitably envelops those artists who have gained wide recognition. His self-knowledge is pitiless. "If not for the revulsion at the smell of his skin, / I could think I was a good man" (338).

In his later years in particular, Milosz became intent on saving as much as possible of that fragile yet genuine multiculturalism that existed for centuries in territories surrounding Wilno-Vilnius-Vilna. He is aware that the multiculturalism of a pre-industrial age was innocent of forced integration sloganeering, and that it can therefore easily be subjected to savage attacks by those skilled at public relations. He defends it without closing his eyes to its shortcomings. His fascination with the vulnerability of civilization goes against the grain of modern thinking which glorifies change. "Cultural change" in our day is gradual and therefore imperceptible to many, whereas the one Milosz refers to involved a brutal form of human engineering: forced and sudden death of entire cultural groups. He knows that "Even Dante's *Divine Comedy* is merely comic / Once its tribe disperses" (278). "For we lived under Judgment, unaware" (313).

After World War I, Paul Valéry came up with the famous comment about European civilization: "We have finally understood that we are mortal." Yet there is a long way between such understanding and an actual experience of

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civilizational mortality. This experience is best conveyed by Milosz. "They tied the hands of man with barbed wire / And dug shallow graves at the edge of the wood" (381). "The pain of uncounted numbers . . . those deported from their homes at dawn" (488). "He who cares for the Republic will have his right hand cut off" (208). "Revealed to us was the contradiction between life and truth" (305). Milosz's bitterness is therefore greater, and perhaps more justified, than that of any American poet I know.

The modern abysses into which he had gazed made Milosz wary of any form of orthodoxy. All kinds of religious heterodoxies attracted him since his student days; a Catholic by background, he was repelled by mindless concentration on one's own dogma and by the easy triumphalism of the people he mixed with in Wilno, i.e., in one section of that multicultural society which Wilno-Vilnius-Vilna represented. He spent incomparably more time writing essays on various mystical philosophies than on Thomism. He pondered and almost accepted the possibilities offered by the cultural currents of his time. In *From the Rising of the Sun* he admits: "Quite early you were a gnostic, A Marcionite, / A secret taster of Manichean poisons." In "Creating the World" he plays with the idea that some demiurge with a caustic sense of humor created that suffering world of ours (*Provinces*, 4-5).

Like other intellectuals of his generation, he has also been attracted to existentialism. "The Earth, neither compassionate nor evil, neither beautiful nor atrocious, persistent, innocent, open to pain and desire" (191). "Both your sins and your good deeds will be lost in oblivion. . ." The goal is "not to desire and to be content. . . "(135) "I learned at last to say / That my home is in a 'permanent polis' built by the mind." If there is nothing on this earth except this earth, "there will remain a word wakened by lips that perish, a tireless messenger who runs and runs through galaxies and protests and screams."

In spite of the Thomistic leanings in his descriptions of what *is*, Milosz's response to the world's multiple imperfections has often been influenced by the search for that secret wisdom accessible only to the refined minds whose wily transformations have been described by Eric Voegelin.

Milosz's fear of any kind of orthodoxy is typical of twentieth-century intellectuals, and particularly of those who, coming from Eastern Europe, have been especially vulnerable to rejection. While the peer pressure today is not hospitable to conservatives (perhaps it never was), a conservative intellectual from Eastern Europe does not even have a chance. Milosz's longtime interest in the Polish sectarian movements of the Renaissance, as well as his occasional "politically correct" articles in such left-wing Polish periodicals as *Gazeta Wyborcza* or *Kultura*, seem to me to be responses to precisely such pressures.[10] He was attracted to the neopaganism of Stanislaw Brzozowski, about whom he wrote an enthusiastic essay and some of whose antipathies to the Polish cultural scene he abundantly shares.[11] Brzozowski bemoaned the lack of a favorable response in Poland to what may be described, in Thomas Molnar's term, as "the pagan temptation" of modernity, or T.S. Eliot's, as seeking "after strange gods." While this lack of interest went hand-in-hand with an admittedly stagnant intellectual life, it saved Polish culture from cultivating in its midst many a tree whose bitter fruit is now massively gathered in Western countries. Such Polish novelists as Henryk Sienkiewicz and Maria Rodziewiczowna have often been singled out for criticism by Milosz because of their lack of intellectualism and because they tended to view the world through Polish eyes, but also per-

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haps because they consciously refused to take the path of ruthless exploration, one that Milosz believes is absolutely necessary to take if a writer truly dedicates his life to art. As W.B. Yeats said, it is either good work or a good life. Adds Milosz: "No one knows how I was paying. Ridiculous, they believe / It may be got for nothing . . . Could I move back time, I am unable to guess / Whether I would have chosen virtue" (133).

The question of whether one can be a great artist while at the same time remaining a serious Christian has been answered in the negative by modern art. Related to that is a common perception of the difficulty, if not the sheer impossibility, of presenting virtue in art, and acknowledgement of the fact that magnificent portraits of vice have graced the pages of world literature for centuries. To an artist even more than to an ordinary man, the flowers of evil must seem so much more enchanting and many-colored, whereas virtue all too often appears, in the words of Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert, to be like an old maid, mousy, sharp-nosed, and characterless.

Thus the description of the human condition which post-Romantic art offers is, by and large, neo-pagan in its vitality and depth, with a heavy admixture of pseudo-Christian compassion, appreciation of the importance of lawless freedom, and idle curiosity about one's own psyche. The virtuous man has disappeared almost completely from recent literature, while those driven by an unquenched thirst for creativity crowd the pages of novels, dramas, and even lyrical poetry. To some extent, and in his prose works in particular, Milosz shares the tendency to elevate this thirst to value number one. In that connection, it is interesting to note his essay on the Polish Romantic poet Zygmunt Krasinski, whose drama *The Undivine Comedy* (1833) is a work of Shakespearian proportions but who never before or after wrote anything approximating the vision and quality of this one play. In answering the question why, Milosz blames Krasinski's intellectual cowardice and his refusal to "journey into the dark region of [his] own fate."[12] Milosz knows that "art is often bought at the price of personal corruption" (55).

It might be added that for artists of Eastern Europe and Russia, the business of choice was additionally obscured in the communist period, when the dichotomy which existed between the art of the "free West" and that of "socialist realism" seemed the only distinction worth making. Many a Russian and Eastern European writer fell for that illusion. While Milosz is not one of the principal victims, he has not been entirely unaffected by it. Such is the price of being accepted in the Western artistic community. Thus Milosz is a man of contradictions. He asserts it himself, and with the insistence I wish he did not possess. "The purpose of poetry is to remind us/ how difficult it is to remain just one person, / for our house is open, there are no keys in the doors, / and invisible guests come in and out at will" (212).

Part of Milosz's *opus* deals with the insights of old age fortified by experience. What are they? In late age, says the poet, he has finally learned to speak calmly. Milosz knows about the necessity of distancing himself from what he writes about, and about the deadly results for the artist of adopting the posture of a man of action. He is not at all impressed by spontaneity and related qualities. He also knows what the world looks like after many disappointments and victories: "There is an understanding and covenant / Between all those whom time has defeated and released" (297).

At the same time the poet clings tenaciously to the reality of the live material world, knowing that any salvation achieved through the mind only is impermanent. "I have learned to doubt

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philosophy / And the visible world is all that remains" (*Provinces*, 63). "I was impatient and easily irritated by time lost on trifles among which I ranked cleaning and cooking. Now, attentively, I cut onions, squeeze lemons, and prepare various kinds of sauces" (341). "There is so much death, and that is why affection / For pigtails, bright-colored skirts in the wind, / For paper boats no more durable than we are. . ." (209) This reminds me of the Devil in *The Brothers Karamazov* who confesses to Ivan that he dreams of becoming incarnate once for all and irrevocably in the form of some merchant's wife weighing two hundred fifty pounds. Like Zosima's brother Markel in the same novel, Milosz comes to understand that human life, that is, intelligent existence in time and space, means happiness (232). There are other forms of Christian hope in his poetry. "One hope: that beyond the River Lethe, there is memory, healed" (357). "For me, therefore, everything has a double existence. Both in time and when time shall be no more" (310).

The above suggests that Milosz is not a poet of his own emotional life, or of anyone else's. He shuns Romantic inquisitiveness about his own soul. There is a kinship between him and the Polish Renaissance poets, Mikolaj Sep-Szarzynski and Jan Kochanowski, who had not yet discovered the self and its nooks and crannies. Self-contemplation is almost totally absent in his poetry. "A man when he talks should not use words that are dear to him" (128). "I keep quiet as is proper / For a man who has learned that the human heart / Holds more than speech does" (131).

Most of Milosz's poetic *oeuvre* consists of short poems, but a reader seeking more than a casual acquaintance with this poet would do well to read at least two longer cycles. One is entitled *From the Rising of the Sun* (1974).[13] The genre of this work is hard to define: there is poetry here, some bibliography, reminiscences about Milosz's family, notes taken from family documents in various languages. The *physicalness* of Eastern Europe, its *Gemütlichkeit*, is well expressed in this seemingly chaotic volume. The other is the *Poetic Treatise* (1957)[14], which squares accounts with Polish culture and its representative figures in a way resembling the *Diary* of another Polish writer and Milosz's contemporary, Witold Gombrowicz.[15]

The fragmentariness of Milosz's vision is only apparent. Now that his *oeuvre* seems to be almost completed, I find that his essays and poems are strangely complementary, and that one has to read his late poems to understand the essays in such collections as *Emperor of the Earth* (1977) and *Native Realm: A Search for Self-Definition* (1958). How much of Milosz is lost in translation? it goes without saying that every great poet adds a new tone to the language in which he writes. The tone which Milosz added to the Polish language is perhaps best approximated by invoking the title of one of his English-language volumes of poetry, *Bells in Winter* (1978). It is that quality of bells ringing on a frosty winter day with which Milosz's poetry overflows, and not only when he writes of gladness and wisdom but also when he invokes devastation and evil. The clarity of sound largely disappears from the English translations, which are somewhat muted and coarse. Yet while the beauty is lost to some extent, the direction of Milosz's gaze is rendered in translation with great accuracy. He is not a poet of empires but of the "backyards of empires" (463), not of castles but of people whose lives are affected by the proud decisions of the inhabitants of castles. Like the American poets of the South, he is a man of restrained mourning. He resurrects in his poetry "bodies assigned for wounds, cities for destruction." He loves those who, like the Polish poet Anna Kamienska, "are gladdened by herbs, wild roses,

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pines, potato fields." Like a true East European, he does not follow any ideological agenda. He also speaks for his generation of European intellectuals, who "hear voices but do not know what they mean" (*Utwory poetyckie: Poems*, 202).

Milosz's poetry derives from the persons, times, and places that gave him early sustenance. Contrary to prevailing opinion, it seems to me that a novelist conjures up a world of his own rather than reflecting a real society, and his insights are largely a product of his imagination. But a poet is more of a product of his early influences, of those "rivers to which we return" (178) when everything else fails. In this sense, Milosz's poetry expresses "the other Europe," one which did not lose touch with what to me seems the essential part of Western heritage: the ontological awareness in its Christian form. There is in Milosz that peculiarly Polish deep delight with the material world, with everyday objects and situations, a gratitude for *is-ness* rooted deeply in primitive Christianity. While the Western world, as it is understood today in America, is infinitely more sophisticated than Eastern Europe, it is in a sense less "Western" than the latter because its links to the notion of Being have been largely severed. This Western Christian notion of Being has unapologetically survived in East Central Europe, and Czeslaw Milosz is second to none in giving it a twentieth-century voice.

1.Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, vol. 1 (The Gathering Storm) (Cambridge, 1948), 315. **2.**Anthony Smith, *The Ethnic Origin of Nations* (Oxford, 1986), 47f. **3.**This famous phrase from Jan Lechon's poem is quoted in Milosz's *Traktat poetycki* [Poetic Treatise] in *Utwory poetyckie: Poems* (Ann Arbor, 1976), 173. **4.**Czeslaw Milosz, *The Collected Poems*, 1931-1987 (New York, 1988), 136. Henceforth, references to this edition will appear as page numbers in parentheses. Quotations from other editions of Milosz's poetry, in Polish and in English, will be referred to by the title and page number, both in parentheses, or footnoted as needed. **5.**Czeslaw Milosz, *Traktat poetycki*, in *Utwory poetyckie*: *Poems*, 177. **6.**Czeslaw Milosz, "Blacksmith Shop," *Provinces* (New York, 1991), 1. **7.**Czeslaw Milosz, *Caffé Greco* (Krakow, 1987), 1. **8.***Provinces*, 18-20. **9.** In 1385, Poland and Lithuania were joined through a royal marriage. Until 1795, or the last partition of Poland, the two countries were called the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and they comprised, in addition to Poland and Lithuania, much of today's Belarus and Ukraine. In the eighteenth century and later, the Commonwealth also comprised three-fourths of world Jewry who moved to Eastern Europe in several waves and thrived there, demographically speaking. For some decades, this largest European state also controlled today's Latvia and Estonia, Transylvania and Moldavia. The capital of Lithuania, Vilnius, was nearly totally Polonized in the process. After the partition of 1795, Wilno and the entire Lithuania passed into Russian hands. After World War I, Vilna became Vilnius, the capital of the new state of Lithuania. The Poles took Vilnius away from the Lithuanians by force, and it again became Wilno. When Soviet Russia attacked Poland in 1939, it seized Wilno and first gave it to the Belorussians, and then, later, to the Lithuanians. After regaining independence in 1991, the Polish Republic officially renounced its claim to Vilnius. **10.**"Panstwo wyznaniowe?" [Are We Becoming a Confessional State?] *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 11 May 1991, reprinted in *Kultura*, No. 7/526-8/527 (July-August 1991), 3-11. **11.**"A One-Man Army: Stanislaw Brzozowski," *Emperor of the Earth: Modes of Eccentric Vision* (Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, 1977), 186-253. **12.**Krasinski's Retreat," *Emperor of the Earth*, 53. **13.***Gdzie wschodzi slonce i kedy zapada* (Paris, 1974). The translations of poems from this volume appear in *Collected Poems*, pp. 229-314. A selection also appears in *Bells in Winter*, translated by the author and Lillian Vallée (New York, 1978). **14.***Traktat poetycki* (Paris, 1957). Only a few slivers of the *Poetic Treatise* appear in *Complete Poems*; most of it has not yet been translated. **15.**Witold Gombrowicz, *Diary*, Vols. 1-2 [1957-1962], translated by Lillian Vallée (Evanston, 1988-1989).

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Matthew Arnold: Poetical and Religious Rite of Passage

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NEAR THE END of his brilliant biography of Matthew Arnold—fifty years later still the best treatment of Arnold's religious thought and literary criticism, although Park Honan's 1981 biography provides much more data and documentation of Arnold's life—Lionel Trilling suggests:

> When a man begins his career in personal confusion and lyric poetry, progresses through literary and political criticism, and arrives at the affirmations of religion, all the charms of symmetry suggest that his work is complete.[1]

However, recent critics, such as Ruth apRoberts,[2] Nathan Scott,[3] and James Livingston[4] have written that Arnold's work is far more provocative and far more a helpful precursor of contemporary existential *Angst*, hermeneutics and complexity, radical demythologization, and decentering deconstructionism than Trilling, or F. H. Bradley,[5] and T. S. Eliot[6]—two other critics who summarily dismissed Arnold's cultural critique and religious vision—could have imagined.

King Arthur confidently declares, as he passes on at the end of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*:

> *The old order changeth, yielding place to new,*
> *And God fulfills Himself in many ways,*
> *Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.*
> *Comfort thyself: What comfort is in me?*[7]

Yet, as Tennyson's contemporary, Arnold found small "comfort" in his passage through the changes in Victorian life and culture; and his own poetical and critical *corpus* is certainly an indication that such change, from our perspective, may actually be upheaval, for he finally argued that traditional Christianity had become a "good custom" that no longer was viable. In order to comfort himself he developed a new hermeneutic of "tact,"[8] submitting the Bible "as literature" to a "readerly" criticism that fundamentally altered our perception of revelation, of salvation, and of doctrinal truth as "poetic" truth, rather than factual or empirical assertion about historical event. The fact had failed Christian belief, for

> There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve. Our religion has materialized itself in the fact, in the supposed fact, and now the fact is failing it.[9]

His statement concerning the Christian faith, "that men cannot do without it; and . . . "that they cannot do with it as it is,"[10] is one of the enduring aphorisms of the

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