

Nobel Prize in Literature 1980



Czeslaw Milosz

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1980 was awarded to Czeslaw Milosz "who with uncompromising clear-sightedness voices man's exposed condition in a world of severe conflicts".

Czeslaw Milosz was born in Lithuania, in 1911, to a family with a background of ancient lineage and in an environment in which primitive folk traditions lived on together with a complex historical heritage. Industrialization had not made itself felt in earnest. People lived in close contact with a still primitive nature. This country and this culture, and most of its people, no longer exist. The Nazi terror and genocide, the war, and later, the Stalinistic tyranny, have wiped them out, in hardships exceeding what Poland and the Baltic States have suffered many times before.

Milosz grew up in the Polish town of Vilna and was educated there. He took an early interest in literature and became one of the leading writers in the young generation who wanted to regenerate poetry and who, with danger to their lives, took an active part in underground freedom movements against the Nazi oppression. As a convinced socialist he was attached to the new Poland's political and intellectual elite, becoming in time a trusted

official and cultural person who represented his country abroad. However, the political climate changed during the cold war in a Stalinistic direction. Nor was the free socialistic Poland, which the young had hoped for, allowed to exist. With his uncompromising demand for artistic integrity and human freedom, Milosz could no longer support the regime. In 1951 he left Poland and settled in Paris as a "free writer" - a term not without ironic overtones. In 1960 he moved to USA as a lecturer on Polish literature at Berkeley University in California. His roots in Poland and his connections with its intellectual life have, however, never been broken.

Disruption and schism between incompatible loyalties, and the abandonment of shattered cultural and social patterns, have marked Milosz's life from the very beginning. In both an outward and an inward sense, he is an exiled writer - a stranger for whom the physical exile is really a reflection of a metaphysical, or even religious, spiritual exile applying to humanity in general. The world that Milosz depicts in his poetry and prose works and essays is the world in which man lives after having been driven out of paradise. But the paradise from which he has been banished is not any bleating idyll, but a genuine Old Testament eden, for better or worse, with the serpent as a rival for supremacy. The destructive and treacherous forces are mingled with the good and creative ones - both are equally true and present. The tensions and contrasts are typical of Milosz's art and outlook on life. There has often been mention of a Manichaeian streak in him, and he himself had admitted it. According to him, one of the writer's most important tasks is, in fact, *ouvrir à celui qui le lit une dimension qui rend l'affaire de vivre plus passionante*. "From galactic silence protect us" and show us "how difficult it is to remain just one person". There is much of the preacher's or Pascal's fervour in him - a passionate striving to make us intensely aware that we actually have been driven out of a paradise and are living scattered abroad, and that there is no paradise but that evil and havoc are forces to combat. To look reality in the face is not to see everything in darkness and give up in gloom and despair, nor is it to see everything in light and to lapse into escapism and delusion. Still less is it to blur the contours and the focus in favour of convenience or compromise. Tension, discord,

passion, contrast - the living exile and the diaspora, at once freely acknowledged and enforced, are the true meaning of our human condition.

Milosz's partly autobiographical novel (in which "the hero", typically enough, is called Thomas - the doubter, the split personality) and his many political, literary and cultural-analytical works form the background of his life and philosophy. They are invaluable to the understanding of his large lyrical production, which, only to a limited extent, is available in translation. In them the vivid experiences of nature from his childhood and youth are illuminated, as well as the ties to the bloody history, complex culture and prolific literary production of Lithuania and Poland. The political analyses, which first made him internationally known, bear the stamp of a rare psychological acuity and intensity.

Milosz is a very intellectual writer - philosophically and ideohistorically schooled, not least, familiar with Catholic thought in a way reminiscent of the erudition and keen mind of his compatriot and kindred soul, Leszek Kolakowski. His writing is learned and dialectic - full of voices and references, pastiches and ironies, breaches of style and roles, polyphonic in its structure. But he is also a very sensual writer. He has the name of being a great linguistic artist, so that his poetry can only be fully appreciated by those who can read it in Polish. One cannot hope to find the musical and rhythmical qualities, the linguistic sensuousness, justly reproduced in translation. But the innate sensuality is there in full measure. His imagery has the character of surprise that only experience can give - that which is experienced in the imagination or memory. The intellectual, at times sophisticated, trait in Milosz has a direct opposite in this talent for lucidity and this required love of the sensuous. The exiled Milosz is nevertheless not entirely exiled. In proximity to concrete reality and in human traditions and fellowship, he seeks a resting place and a reconciliation as a defence against the destructive forces that hold sway in the world to which we are delivered against our will. Distance and presence characterize him in like degree. The same applies to his relationship to his new country, where, after twenty years, he is still an alien with a strange language and strange roots - but is also recognized and incorporated into a

new and living fellowship; a writer who must be translated to be understood, and who is understood and valued, though perhaps in a roundabout way and in incomplete reproductions. He holds that, in fact, this is something that concerns us all, writers or not.

Multiplicity and tensions mark Milosz's work - strong passions, but also strict discipline and unerring perspicacity. A youthful, implacable fervour never lets him reconcile himself to man's powerlessness, the tendency of language towards tricks of illusion and the failures of sympathy, to "remorse that we did not love the poor ashes in Sachsenhausen with absolute love, beyond human power". This fervour of his combines with a mature, experienced and sorely tried man's broadmindedness and with a striving for self-control and a stoic or even Epicurean heroism. One comes across outbursts of defiance and rage - violent polarizations, almost Nietzschean in their frenzy against the conditions of creation which compel man to be nothing but a man, unable - as the gods can - to change what is mean and cruel. Against this are contrasted ironies, linguistic reductions and moments of calmly clarified repose in what is merely simple and present - miraculously present. His writing is many-voiced and dramatic, insistent and provocative. This is true not only of his poetry but also of his prose - the novels, the analyses and, in every sense of the word, the many-sided essays which perhaps have been overlooked in favour of his poetry.

Czeslaw Milosz is a difficult writer, in the best sense of the word - complex and erudite, challenging and demanding, changing between different moods and levels, from the elegiac to the furious, and from the abstract to the extremely concrete. He is an author of great importance - captivating and arresting, not least because of his complications.

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