

## THE AMERICAN MIŁOSZ



*Harry Clifton*

In the late Seventies towards the end of the Cold War, the American magazine *Time* ran a photograph of three exiles from the Eastern Bloc—the dancer Baryshnikov, the poet Brodsky and the cellist Rostropovitch—arm in arm, doing a can-can for the camera. Meanwhile in Vermont, another exile, the novelist Solzhenitsyn, had fenced himself off from American life to develop *The Red Wheel*, his cycle of texts on the Russian Revolution. Without prejudice to either party, both are worth bearing in mind in any note on the American sojourns of the Polish poet Milosz.

Irish poets, those at any rate whose writing lives coincided in whole or part with the Cold War, will recognise, if not the full scale of oppositional East-West politics, at least the stages of involvement with America laid out over the years in various Milosz texts. The early exposure through reading to the myth of America (his immersion in the novels of Thomas Mayne Reid), the presence of distant relatives there from earlier waves of emigration (as mentioned in *The Year of the Hunter*); later on, the open-ended option of “spending a few years in America” (his residence there as a Polish cultural attaché from 1945 to 1950), and finally the existential choice of settling there full-time (a professorship in California from 1960 onwards) with attendant anguishes and ambivalences vis-à-vis the Old World left behind. Not precisely an Irish pattern, but familiar to a degree.

There is a simple and a complex version of Milosz in America, both provided by the poet himself. The simple version, later glossed in his self-description as simply a Greek who changed cities, comes in the poem “Greek Portrait” dated Washington 1948

I have left behind  
My native land, home and public office.  
Not that I looked for profit or adventure...  
Nor do I refuse to pay due homage  
To local gods. And I eat what others eat.  
About myself, this much will suffice.

At the same time however, a more complex vision of living in a newly-empowered, optimistic but simple-minded America, while Eastern Europe freezes up under Communism, emerges in such poems as “The Spirit of the Laws”, which, as he later writes, could not have been understood by Americans at the time.

I could enter parking lots, iridescent soap bubbles  
And listen to the laboring  
Of the eternal humanity of muted notes,  
Of industrious, agile male muscles  
Over a hot butterfly of carmine...  
The shine, the juice, the rouge of the day  
All of it  
Seemed to be the beginning of the sun on yellow plains  
Where in railway stations at a wobbling table,  
Sitting over an empty glass, their faces in their hands,  
Are the sad engineers of prison trains.

The drive-in paradise of popular entertainment, the theatre of natural superabundance, can only be entered into by lobotomising away “the sad engineers of prison trains”, the ghosts of Europe, the spirit of history. What is left is orange juice for breakfast, beaver-watching in Pennsylvania, small-town burlesque shows, and the sensation, in a Detroit hotel, of exploding outwards like an egg in the unpressurised vacuum of American space. “What had I to do there?” he writes much later in *The Year of the Hunter*, “What was America for me? Birth, copulation and death.” The practical things that kept him there—his wife’s desire to rear a family in peace, his own need to breathe away from the claustrophobia of Russian-occupied Poland—yielded to the purely poetic need for the right kind of pressure, to be found this time in France:

To choose to live in America would have meant choosing to live outside of time. What concern of mine were those presidential elections, the Democrats, the Republicans—I could not feel the rhythm of time in any of that. That was not a place where I could feel the granularity of historical time. Thus what remained was nature. I still perceive America exclusively as nature. For me, America is recurrence (*Conversations with Czeslaw Milosz*).

By the time he returned, ten years later in 1960, to what was to be more or less permanent residence in San Francisco, he appears to have worked through his personal Old World crisis in books like *The Captive Mind*,

*The Issa Valley, A Treatise on Poetry and Native Realm.* The decision to live again in America seems not to have been ideological, more prompted by the failure of France to offer him any worthwhile teaching position, and his unwillingness to live there as a freelance writer. In spite of earlier reservations, a new commitment to American reality appears in the poems.

I learned at last to say: this is my home,  
here, before the glowing coal of ocean sunsets,  
on the shore which faces the shores of your Asia,  
in a great republic, moderately corrupt. ("To Raja Rao")

At the same time, given the decision to settle in America, a position has to be taken vis-à-vis the prevailing reality there of the Sixties and Seventies, and it is often a deeply Conservative one, not to may harshly dismissive at times:

Here, now, I am only asking myself what I have learned in America, and what I value in that experience. I can boil it all down to three sets of pros and cons: for the so-called average man, against the arrogance of intellectuals; for the Biblical tradition, against the search for individual or collective nirvana; for science and technology, against dreams of primeval innocence.  
(*Visions from San Francisco Bay*)

The impatience with the Woodstock generation, the plague-on-both your-houses attitudes to Allen Ginsberg ("whose hysterical *Howl* comes mainly from Henry Miller") and Robert Lowell ("fifteen lashes on the bare behind would have cured him quicker than any mental institution"), the contempt for the student and sexual "revolutions", are only part of the story. As always, the prose of Milosz, for all its erudition and intelligence, not to say its waspish score-settlings, is to be taken with a grain of salt. In the poetry of the same period, often canvassing similar ground though with Biblical terms of reference, a deeper business is being transacted. American time, or time as seasonal recurrence, and European time, or time as History, are being replaced by the "metahistorical" time of Saint John of the Apocalypse, whose end will be the end of the world, both good and evil, in *apokatastasis*. So, in a poem like "Oeconomia Divina", the airfield, may well be a refuelling point for American planes in Vietnam, but the drama is more than technological or even political. It is the progressive dematerialisation of reality under a god whose ordering principles have been withdrawn.

Roads on concrete pillars, cities of glass and cast iron,  
airfields larger than tribal dominions  
suddenly ran short of their essence and disintegrated.

Not in a dream but really, for, subtracted from themselves,  
they could only hold on as do things which should not last.  
Out of trees, field stones, even lemons on the table,  
materiality escaped and their spectrum  
proved to be a void, a haze on a film.  
Dispossessed of its objects, space was swarming.  
Everywhere was nowhere, and nowhere, everywhere.

And the figures in the long Biblical lines of “A Year” may be Hippies, but  
a larger eschatology is coming to pass through them than the dubious  
fruition of the postwar Baby Boom.

That was a high year, fox-colored, like a crosscut  
redwood stump or vine leaves on the hills in November.  
In its groves and chambers the pulse of music was beating  
strongly running down from dark mountains, tributaries  
entangled.  
A generation clad in patterned robes trimmed with little bells  
greeted me with the banging of conga drums.  
I repeated their songs of ecstatic despair walking by the sea  
when it bore in boys on surfboards and washed my  
footprints away.  
O sun, o stars, I was saying, holy, holy, holy is our being  
Beneath heaven and the day and our endless communion.

At this point a question arises not irrelevant to the many Irish poets, writers and academic critics who travel to, make their lives in, or enjoy the hospitality of American institutions—the extent to which acceptance of patronage from a great republic, moderately corrupt, carries the proviso that a blind eye will be turned, in speech or writing, to the darker side of that republic’s activities elsewhere. Here, a notable silence falls in an otherwise thriving Irish poetics. Is it hypocritical to ask, therefore, why a silence also falls in Milosz, with reference to American interventions in Vietnam and elsewhere? Probably not, but the answer too is fairly obvious—an on-the-ground experience and fear of Russian Communism running far back into childhood, and the feeling that his political accounts, in the strict sense, had already been settled in France, before emigration to America. What is at stake in the American Milosz of the Sixties onwards is no longer politics but the texture and evanescence of time itself, and the incommunicability of suffering to those born by pure chance, in a more fortunate time or place.

I covered my face with my hands and those sitting on the  
benches kept silent.

They were unknown to me, for my age was over and my generation lost. ("From the Rising of the Sun")

In the Sixties and Seventies, Milosz could still describe himself as one of many expatriate poets in the Bay Area of San Francisco, writing in a babel of languages. By the Eighties, with the Nobel award, all that had changed, and the man of whom Gallimard, in reply to enquiries about his books, wrote "author unknown", could glory in endless reprints, complete translations. The temptation to play the sage who cleverly chose the winning side before it was obvious has largely been avoided, and the prose works of the Eighties, in which self-justification is tempered by self-excoriation, are mellow. A human being, fragile in marriage, open to ideas of psychology, ill at times or a visitant to the ill and dying, emerges from behind the intellectually-armourplated, daimonium-driven chain-smoker of previous decades, dividing his time more evenly now between America and a newly accessible Eastern Europe, insisting less on a tragic division of worlds, and more on the comic misunderstandings at the heart of his own fame.

You would like to hear how it is in old age?

Certainly, not much is known about that country

Till we land there ourselves with no right to return.

("A New Province")

And the guide to that country is another Irish poet, the author of *Krapp's Last Tape*—as long as we understand, writes Milosz, that the later Krapp is no wiser than the earlier. In that country of old age, it is no longer *Time* which matters, but time.