

*Eastern Recollections*

Joseph Brodsky, *Collected Poems in English*. Ed. Ann Kjellberg.

Trans. Anthony Hecht, Derek Walcott, Richard Wilbur and others. Carcanet, £14.95 (pbk)

Czesław Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems 1931-2001*. Trans. Robert Hass and others. Penguin, £30 (hbk)

The note on the cover of Czesław Miłosz's *New and Collected Poems* quotes Joseph Brodsky saying that Miłosz is "one of the greatest poets of our time, perhaps the greatest". Miłosz, in turn, wrote an introduction to the first Polish edition of Brodsky's poems, calling him "an extraordinary poet, international, yet adding splendor to Russian poetry". Surely there must have been some deep affinity between these two East European poets as the attention they granted each other goes beyond mere compliment and social nicety. Despite the generational gap between the two, their biographies and poetic careers ran parallel, narrating two very similar stories. Both were exiles from Eastern Europe who settled in America: Miłosz defected from Poland in 1951, Brodsky was forced to leave the USSR twenty years later. Both were awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in the decade which marked itself so dramatically in the history of Eastern Europe: Miłosz in 1980, Brodsky in 1987. Both knew each other well and seemed to admire each other's work. Brodsky translated Miłosz into Russian, Miłosz wrote favourably about Brodsky. Both have monumental volumes of their collected poems published recently: Brodsky's *Collected Poems in English* amounts to over 500 pages, Miłosz's *New and Collected Poems* to over 700 pages.

With these important volumes now available, the time seems ripe to examine the parallels between the two poets. Should external, non-literary circumstances such as the ones I enumerated above determine the way we read their work? Can we indeed speak of Miłosz and Brodsky as two kindred spirits, or is it simply

our intellectual inertia that makes us classify them as such, assuming that a similar geopolitical and historical context determines and elucidates their work?

Since its first translations into English, Miłosz's poetry has been admired mostly, and in some quarters exclusively, for its encounters with the history of the twentieth century; this is true even now, after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Though Miłosz himself would hate such a categorisation, he is still respected as the witness of history, and his work as a testimony of the century. Charles Simic, another Eastern European exile, in the opening sentence of his review of *New and Collected Poems* contrasts Miłosz's work with contemporary American poetry, which in his view is blind to History: American poets in the waning years of the twentieth century write "as if History had nothing to do with them". It is predictably characteristic of this attitude to Miłosz's work that Simic proceeds to identify history with its most nightmarish moments, or as he straightforwardly puts it: with evil. In this reading, being exposed to history equals being exposed to evil, while those who have undergone the ordeals of the twentieth century are believed to have acquired all-embracing wisdom and the hard-earned right to speak on behalf of all humanity. Simic's words may indicate that American, or, more generally, Western readers look up to Miłosz driven primarily by the feeling of a sort of spiritual dispossession, assisted by an equally strong feeling of guilt that they have been spared most of the horrors of history that Miłosz writes about. One could risk saying then that Miłosz plays an unwilling therapeutic function in the treatment of the modern ailment of dehistoricisation. The appetite for Miłosz is the unfulfilled desire for history—the more dramatic the better.

This is surely an important aspect of Miłosz's poetry, but only one of the many. As his *New and Collected* proves, his work cannot be reduced to purely documentary status. It is true that poems such as "A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto" and "Campo dei Fiori" were written in 1944 in immediate response to the tragedy of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, and as such can indeed be read as unique documents of the age of the Holocaust. Six years later, as if endorsing this kind of reading, Miłosz wrote a short poem "You Who Wronged", in response to the terrors of another political system, Stalinism. In words directed to an unnamed tyrant, Miłosz defined the functions of poetry: "Do not feel safe. The poet remembers./ You can kill one, but another is born./ The words

are written down, the deed, the date". And Miłosz has kept on writing down words, and deeds, and dates up to the present day.

But his poetry challenged not only political history. Believing that the poet's task was to remember, Miłosz kept on writing about victims of that other great annihilator, Time. Though never abandoning his position as witness of History, Miłosz began writing more frequently about the anonymous, private world that vanishes in time. Yeatsian themes emerged, with the poet recollecting his childhood, his first loves and erotic encounters, the world of mundane objects and everyday affairs. In Miłosz's life and work, the sense of loss and deprivation that comes with old age is characteristically amplified and concretised by the literal loss of the country of his youth—Lithuania. Miłosz left his homeland during the war only to come back to it half a century later. No wonder then that in his poetry exile acquires a mythological dimension: Lithuania stands for the Edenic world from which Miłosz was expelled both by History and by Time. A sequence of poems from *Facing the River*, which explicitly alludes to the Heraclitean flux, records his visit to Lithuania after fifty-two years. It is an impossible return, since Miłosz realises that the country he left no longer exists outside his memories: Time has removed the people who he knew and History has wiped out the landscape in which he grew up.

However Sisyphean this task may seem, Miłosz's ambition is to embrace the whole variety of human existence, not by offering a synthesised, general picture, but by accumulating, cataloguing, and accruing. The poet's duty to remember, which he formulated in political terms in "You Who Wronged", is also carried out in Miłosz's attention to detail: only in their individual, unique manifestations can things of this world be saved in one's memory. The sheer vastness of Miłosz's oeuvre, its repetitiveness often too much in evidence, the increasing presence of autobiographical themes, the enumerative structure of many of his poems—all this comes as part and parcel of his "redemptive" poetics.

The poet remembers and writes down everything in the belief that by itemising the existing world he will not only save it from oblivion, but will also manage to reach the "eternal moment". This oxymoronic phrase accurately summarises Miłosz's ambiguous attitude: the need to discover the immovable pattern of the moveable world, and at the same time the equally strong impulse to record the heterogeneous multiplicity and the mesmerising

flux of visible reality. Miłosz seems to trust that his senses will lead him to the intimations of the eternal, as he does believe—resembling in this respect Eliot, whom he has translated into Polish—that it is in time that time can be conquered. Poems which retrieve details from memory, present them in their sensual seductiveness and challenge established hierarchies, belong to Miłosz’s greatest poetic moments. His belief that multiplicity may lead to Oneness explains his systematic use of contradictions, as well as his numerous, often conflicting voices.

When read beside Miłosz, Joseph Brodsky, thirty years his junior, has often been identified as the poet more sceptical of the public domain. As is commonly known, in an infamous trial in 1961 he was sentenced not for political subversion or dissident activities, but for an attempt to live apart from the falsified reality of Soviet Russia. His crime was unrestrained individualism, the will to remain free not only from the requirements of the official ideology, but also from subordination to the dissidents if he were to become involved in their activities.

Yet Brodsky’s *Collected Poems* may surprise some readers by the number of poems inspired directly by political events: the invasion of Afghanistan, the introduction of martial law in Poland in 1981, the death of general Zhukov, the instalment of Jimmy Carter as president, the Berlin Wall, the Northern Irish crisis, the war in Bosnia, not to mention “History of the Twentieth Century”, the long unfinished poem written in English which is exactly what its title promises it to be. It is hard to believe that this is the poet who famously gave politics the cold shoulder. It might be claimed that despite popular opinion, Brodsky was a political animal, but his political vision transcended the topicality of the events, avoided the reefs of partisanship, interventionism and journalism, by absorbing the public domain into the poet’s basic metaphorical opposition, the one between the individual, whose element is time, and the public realm (or the imperium, as he often called it), which he associated with space.

Being aware of the dangers of simplification, one could try to define the differences between the two poets. Whereas Miłosz focuses on what makes historical events unique, Brodsky is eager to identify in them extra-temporal, universal traits. Whereas Miłosz goes for distinctions, Brodsky looks for affinities and analogies. Hence Miłosz’s poems may baffle their readers with numerous Polish names, place names, and historical details;

Brodsky's refer the readers to analogies in antiquity: to ancient Rome, Greece, Persia, China. Hence Miłosz's growing interest in autobiography, always individualising his accounts of history, which, in contrast, is virtually absent in Brodsky.

Characteristically, in many of his poems written in exile, Brodsky did not care to distinguish between the Soviet Union and America: to him both represented the imperium, a secular political power that curtails the freedom of the individual. The Berlin Wall, from his poem of this title stands in the company of similar walls built elsewhere and in other epochs. Miłosz, on the other hand, being a catastrophist in his youth, seems to show more understanding for the linear concept of time and history, though of course, he also employs historical analogies and parallels in his historical poems.

But apart from the different ways in which Miłosz and Brodsky conceptualised history, there is another important difference in their work. Brodsky's poetics seems akin to the Symbolist sensibility: to him the "truth of poetry" resides in the dynamism of language, in the steady rhythms of his stanzas, in the inevitability of his rhymes, and the overpowering consistency of assonance and alliteration. Form had symbolic meaning for him, phonetics and semantics were inextricably bound, and metre was the embodiment of Time. Miłosz, who expressed his impatience with Mallarmé, accusing him of opening European poetry to the plague of nihilism, distrusted writers who were ready to give full rein to language; with his interest in Swedenborg, Blake, Simone Weil, and with his emotional and intellectual ties with his cousin Oscar Miłosz, the French mystical poet, Czesław Miłosz is more of a visionary than a wordsmith; a poet searching for the just image rather than for *le mot just*. This might explain Miłosz's continued interest in Buddhism and in the tradition of the Zen-based haiku (Miłosz compiled an anthology of haiku in his own translations). His overtly mystical inclinations notwithstanding, one can see him as a poet attracted to the Imagist extreme of modern poetry, with its "direct treatment of the thing", rather than to the Symbolist pole of *poésie pure*.

Miłosz's interest in the mystical tradition of European visionaries and the Buddhist-like attention to the external world set him apart from Brodsky's unconditional trust in the power of language. Brodsky seems to be carried by the linguistic impulse, the free associational flow of words linked by their rhythm and

music, sometimes leading him astray to the confusion and vexation of his readers. Miłosz, on the other hand, seems to use language to communicate something that is essentially pre- or non-verbal. Hence Miłosz often falls into the trap of confusing poetry with philosophy, or theology: on the one hand showing a predilection for discursive language, and on the other for high-flown rhetoric, the Biblical phrasing, and the grave diction. This discursiveness in Miłosz, once a liberating move in modern poetry, now seems to dominate in his work, and is responsible for the occasional flatness of voice and the declarative character of his idiom. In consequence Polish poets of the younger generation turn away from Miłosz, seeing his work as linguistically sterile.

The dangers that awaited Brodsky were of a different nature: his Russian poems translated into English, even by expert hands such as Anthony Hecht and under the poet's supervision, always lose some important dimension, be it the linguistic and formal logic that governs their otherwise baffling flow of whimsical allusions or the seemingly arbitrary imagery. When Brodsky started writing in English, he nearly always failed, as the last section of his *Collected* documents. He strove for the linguistic and melodic effects characteristic of Russian, but often unavailable in, or alien to, English. In this respect, Miłosz's poetry is easier to translate. One should remember though that the *New and Collected Poems* does not bring together all of Miłosz's œuvre. It is not difficult to guess what kind of poems were omitted: these are the regular, rhymed poems of the pre-war period and the long pastiches of neo-classical poetic treatises.

When Miłosz once described Brodsky as a poet of hierarchy, he was in fact also defining his own position. Both poets believed in the power, if not the duty, of poetry to establish hierarchies, to make clear-cut distinctions in the fragmented, homogenised world by differentiating "between things which are important and which are less important", between the sublime and the corrupt. In this way they both treated poetry essentially as an ethical activity which, in a Promethean gesture, defies what they diagnosed as the disorder, madness, and spiritual sterility of modern culture. Both found the contemporary world not only dissatisfying in its lack of metaphysical sensitivity, but also dangerously nihilistic. It may be that these two poets, rather than opening new avenues for poetry, have in fact concluded one of its heroic chapters.

*Norwid Lost in Translation*

Cyprian Kamil Norwid, *Poems—Letters—Drawings*. Trans. Jerzy Peterkiewicz et al. Carcanet, £7.95 (pbk)

It is my hope that during my lifetime Cyprian Kamil Norwid (1821-1883) will join Baudelaire, de Nerval, Laforgue, Rimbaud, Hölderlin, Dickinson and Hopkins to become internationally recognised as a shaper of twentieth-century poetic sensibility. Carcanet has just issued Norwid's *Poems—Letters—Drawings*, the translations mainly by Jerzy Peterkiewicz. This is the first Norwid volume in English published outside Poland. Will it bring the fulfilment of my hope a step nearer? Alas, I fear it won't. The translations are often so bad, they are likely to have the opposite effect. Readers will ask: why are Poles so obsessed with this clumsy and at times clearly unintentionally comic verse. They will also wonder why a very reputable publisher of poetry is responsible for this débâcle.

Let's consider a passage in one of Norwid's most celebrated poems, his "Rhapsody in Memory of General Bem", who fought for Polish and Hungarian independence, then settled in Syria and converted to Islam. Norwid's way of celebrating this remarkable life is to imagine Bem's funeral as a mysterious mediæval rite. But instead of progressing to a swift burial, the cortège embarks on a nocturnal quest through a moonlit valley. Peterkiewicz gives us this:

They enter the ravine, they get lost... emerge from a moonlit  
door  
Darkly against the sky, caressed by a cold gleam  
That snatches up their metal, immobile meteor,  
And the stilled chorale bursts forth, once more like a moun-  
tain stream.