

Uncaptive Mind

by Benjamin Balint

For Czesław Miłosz, certainly the most acclaimed Polish poet of the last century, poetry can serve as “an instrument that raises us above what we are.” In his admiring and authoritative biography, Andrzej Franaszek reveals Miłosz’ inner struggles in the context of the upheavals of twentieth-century Poland and of the entanglements of literature and politics.

Reviewed: Andrzej Franaszek, *Miłosz: A Biography*, Harvard University Press, 515 pages, 2017 (translated by Aleksandra and Michael Parker).

In May 1943, as Germans “liquidated” Jews in the Warsaw ghetto, Czesław Miłosz and several friends stood on a nearby balcony. “We could hear screaming from the ghetto [...]. This screaming gave us goose pimples. They were the screams of thousands of people being murdered [...]. There was something particularly cruel in this peace of the night, whose beauty and human crime struck the heart simultaneously. We did not look each other in the eye.” Miłosz enunciated the experience in a pair of blunt-force poems—“A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto” and “Campo dei Fiori”—which juxtapose the flames and salvos from inside the ghetto wall against the carefree couples enjoying a spring day on the “Aryan” side.

A year after the Warsaw ghetto uprising, Miłosz fled “the red dust of the rubble” to a friend’s house near Krakow:

When we were fleeing the burning city
And looked back from the first field path
I said: “Let the grass grow over our footprints,
Let the harsh prophets fall silent in the fire,
Let the dead explain to the dead what happened.

Together with his younger brother Andrzej, Miłosz helped Jews escape from the Vilna ghetto and found them hiding places—a feat for which Yad Vashem in Jerusalem would recognize both brothers as “Righteous among the Nations.” Miłosz would later describe these years as “an encounter of a European poet with the hell of the twentieth century, not hell’s first circle, but a much deeper one.”

Fleeing totalitarianism

In his capacious and admiring biography of the poet, a decade in the making, Andrzej Franaszek deftly frames the space between a consciously crafted public persona as a disciplined witness to this hellish history and a private man who contended with despair. Franaszek, a professor of Polish literature in Kraków, not only has a good feel for the tone and substance of Miłosz’s many registers of poetry; he also puts the inner struggles of his subject’s life and work in the context of the upheavals of twentieth-century Poland—and, by extension, in the context of the entanglements of literature and politics.

The most acclaimed Polish poet of the last century was born to a Catholic family in 1911 in a town in present-day Lithuania, then part of the Russian Empire. At age 10, he moved with the family to Vilnius (Wilno in Polish), the cosmopolitan capital of Lithuania, a city of Poles, Lithuanians, Germans, Russians, Jesuits, and Jews, where he studied law. In the early 1930s, during a scholarship in Paris, Czesław apprenticed himself to his uncle, the poet and diplomat Oscar Miłosz. The meeting, Franaszek writes, not only awakened Miłosz to the poetic vocation, but “enabled him gradually to find a place for himself with the Church, while maintaining his fierce opposition to its politically right-wing sympathies” (p. 66).

“Wandering on the outskirts of heresy,” is how Miłosz described his own firm but never complacent Catholic faith. That faith informed his view of poetry as “a contradiction to nihilism” and an antidote to moral relativism. But it also gave him a life-long inclination to what he called “*delectatio morosa*, the negative tendency to mull over a bowl of one’s sins,” he admitted. “Oh, this Christian masochism,” he confessed in 1931. “I only feel right when I commit a sin or can talk about my insignificance in simple terms. I used to visit a brothel in order to cultivate bitterness” (quoted in Franaszek, p. 113).

By the outbreak of World War II, the 28-year-old Miłosz had published two well-received volumes of poetry, and had learned to join detached contemplation with engaged participation. During the German occupation of Poland, Miłosz worked to save books from the Warsaw University library, translated into Polish T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, completed a collection of essays on the roots of totalitarianism called *Legends of Modernity*, and put together an anthology of anti-Nazi poetry, *The Invincible Song*. During the war years, he sensed that “hell was spreading over the world like a drop of ink on blotting paper.” Yet he

also felt the compulsion, as he put it, to “proclaim that what appeared to be the end was not the end of either tradition or literature or art” (quoted in Franaszek, p. 209).

After the war, although not a member of the Communist Party, Miłosz landed a sought-after post in the diplomatic corps. He served for five years as a cultural attaché of the new Polish Communist government in New York and Washington—“a minor clerk in a satellite embassy,” he said—and met American intellectuals like Dwight Macdonald, James Burnham, and Robert Lowell.

But he chafed against the authoritarianism and boorishness of the Party, and the moral compromises it increasingly demanded. By the end of 1947, the poet had become seriously concerned with the situation in his country. In October 1947, he wrote: “The moment that telling the truth about one’s own country is considered opting for the opposition, the situation is very bad.”

By 1950, Miłosz’s superiors questioned his loyalty and charged him with a “hostile and slanderous attitude to all aspects of life in Poland.” To shorten his leash, the apparatchiks recalled him to Warsaw and confiscated his passport, forcing him to leave his pregnant wife Janka and three-year old son behind in Washington. The Warsaw he found on his return was “Orwellian,” he reported, “with bugging devices in the walls, with wild fear in everyone’s eyes.”

The next year, desperate to preserve his moral and artistic integrity, Miłosz broke with the Polish regime and sought political asylum in France. As “the first intellectual and writer of that caliber to become a fugitive from the Soviet bloc,” Franaszek writes, Miłosz became “a media sensation” (p. 299). Declaring him an enemy of the state, the People’s Republic of Poland banned his books and struck his name from encyclopedias.

Miłosz also incurred wrath on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Fellow Polish émigrés regarded him as a crypto-Communist stooge and demanded public gestures of remorse. One suggested that after “six years of devoted service in captivity,” the poet ought to submit to “at least six years of silence.” Parisian leftists meanwhile castigated Miłosz for having dishonored a “progressive” paradise. “At that time,” Miłosz recalled, “French intellectuals were completely in love with Communism and Stalin. Anyone who was dissatisfied and who came from the East like myself was considered a madman or an agent of America.”

Although he harbored no illusions about Stalin’s crimes, in private Miłosz reproached himself. “How can one get rid of the feeling that one is a traitor and a swine?” (quoted in Franaszek, p. 296). Miłosz wrote shortly after his defection. “Representing a country that was turned into the province of a totalitarian foreign state was wrong and degrading,” he said in 1957, “which I feel ashamed of today.”

Miłosz issued his response in the form of a furious book-length farewell letter called *The Captive Mind* (1953). He uses five case studies to rebuke the disfiguring temptations of totalitarianism, and the self-deceptions of intellectuals in thrall to an ideology that justified tyranny in the name of a historically necessary utopia. The book, Miłosz said, was written “at the time when the majority of French intellectuals resented their country’s dependence on American help and placed their hopes in a new world in the East, ruled by a leader of incomparable wisdom and virtue, Stalin.” It would prove as enduring and as subtle a study of the totalitarian habits of mind as Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and Raymond Aron’s *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (1955). The Irish poet Seamus Heaney called its author “the Aquinas of the Cold War.”

During his decade in Paris, Miłosz also wrote articles for the Polish section of the BBC and published an autobiography, *Native Realm*. Yet poetry figured as his main vehicle of expression. In the preface to his book-length poem *A Treatise on Poetry* (1956), he writes: “One clear stanza can take more weight/ Than a whole wagon of elaborate prose.”

Persona non grata ?

In 1961, at age fifty, Miłosz returned to the United States as a professor of Slavic languages and literature at the University of California, Berkeley. “I was an obscure professor in an obscure department,” he said. “No one writes to me,” he complained in December 1961. “It is as if I ceased to exist.”

The solitude of California (“the land of most complete alienation,” as he described it) only exacerbated what Miłosz had called “my persistent dissonance with the world.” Fluent in Polish, Lithuanian, Russian, English and French, he learned Hebrew and Greek well enough to later translate ten books of the Bible into Polish. Yet in the new country, he said, his brushes with evil were incommunicable and his poems were “as incomprehensible as if they were written in Chinese” (quoted in Franaszek, p. 363). As he looked out over San Francisco Bay he sometimes felt like “a ghost at a spiritualist séance,” he wrote in 1970, “who cannot tell whether his knocking is picked up by anyone” (quoted in Franaszek, p. 379). Only in 1973, when his first collection of poems appeared in English, did he begin to gain an American readership. Among the poets who acknowledged their deep debts to Miłosz’s poetry in translation were Robert Pinsky, Robert Hass, Edward Hirsch, and Mark Strand.

The censorship of Miłosz in Poland meanwhile began to show cracks. “In the 1970s,” Robert Pinsky quipped, “Czesław knew that the Soviet authorities in Poland were beginning to rehabilitate his reputation when an official reference work alluded to him—unmistakably, though not by name—as one of several poets in his generation who were of no particular significance.”

In his 1974 poem “From the Rising of the Sun,” Miłosz asks: “When will that shore appear from which at last we see/How all this came to pass and for what reason?” He could not know that his works—smuggled into Poland, recorded on cassette tapes, read at clandestine meetings, and disseminated by underground presses—were even then shaping dissident discourse. In 1976, the Polish dissident Adam Michnik met Miłosz in Paris. “After the third bottle of wine,” recounts Michnik, “I began reciting Miłosz’s poems from memory, without a break. I knew a good few of them. And suddenly, to my amazement, I saw tears flowing down the poet’s cheeks. Embarrassed, I stopped ... and then heard him speak in a tremulous voice: ‘I never expected young people in Poland to know my poems by heart. I thought I was *persona non grata*.’”

Only in 1980, with Miłosz’s Nobel Prize for literature, did Polish authorities lift the ban on his poetry. The next year, the writer who had fled from Stalinist Poland returned to the country for the first time in thirty years. He was given a hero’s welcome and hailed as a living legend, second only to the Polish Pope, John Paul II. Lines from his poem “You Who Wronged” were printed on Solidarity posters and inscribed on the monument in Gdansk honoring Polish shipyard workers shot for striking against the dictatorship.

Miłosz spent his final years in Kraków. “One after another my former lives were departing,” he wrote, “like ships, together with their sorrow.” He died there in the summer of 2004, at the age of 93.

A poetry suffused with compassion

Others saw in Miłosz “the image of a strong, shrewd man,” he said, “whereas I know my own weakness and I am inclined to consider myself, rather, as a tangle of reflexes, a drunken child in the fog.” Behind the mask, he said, “diabolic dwarfs of temptations somersaulted in me” (quoted in Franaszek, p. 394). He writes:

The purpose of poetry is to remind us
how difficult it is to remain just one person...

Aside from its rich detail, quarried from interviews and from archives at the Yale’s Beinecke Library and Maisons-Laffitte (the Paris home of the Polish émigré press *Kultura*), Franaszek’s biography has the virtue of rhyming the contradictory impulses in the man with the tensions animating his work.

Though only half as long as the Polish original (published in 2011), Franaszek’s book, felicitously edited and translated into English by the British husband-and-wife team Aleksandra and Michael Parker, gives ample glimpses of what Miłosz himself called his “monstrous egoism” and short temper. (The Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska likened Miłosz

to “an angry cherub” [quoted in Franaszek, p. 228].) But this biography also shows how deeply his poetry was suffused with compassion for what Miłosz called the “trembling of the small before the great.”

Poetry, Miłosz suggested, was more than a form of political commentary: it could serve as “an instrument that raises us above what we are.” Franaszek shows that Miłosz’s poetry in particular comes alive in the tension between the world as it should be (a willed naïveté), and as it was (a poetry of intense observation that sought “to glorify things just because they are”). If this biography succeeds, it is because it conveys how Miłosz, like his poems, oscillated between vigilant intelligence and transcendent imagination, engagement and distance, solidarity and solitude.

In one of his more exalted poems, “Dedication,” Miłosz disavows fancy eloquence. “I swear, there is in me no wizardry of words.” And then he writes:

That I wanted good poetry without knowing it,
That I discovered, late, its salutary aim,
In this and only this I find salvation.

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