

Czeslaw Milosz around the world

Cynthia L. Haven

Few poets have been feted with such rock-star exuberance as Milosz

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Czeslaw Milosz, 1981 Photograph: Bernard Gotfryd/Getty images

In May this year, the streets of old Cracow were dominated by two names, two events. Czeslaw Milosz's centenary jostled with Pope John Paul II's beatification in windows, on banners and billboards, on bookstore shelves, in fliers and leaflets – the pope, perhaps, having the edge over the Nobel laureate, except on the kiosks where Milosz Festival posters prevailed. "It seems to me every poet after death goes through a Purgatory", Milosz told me over a decade ago. "So he must go through that moment of revision after death." The "revision", at this point, is a triumph of twenty-first-century branding and marketing, featuring commemorative books, pens, postcards, blank books, and T-shirts; Milosz's scrawled signature appears on napkins and even on the wrappers of tiny biscotti.

Few poets have been feted with such rock star exuberance. The "Milosz Pavilion" on Szczepanski Square hosted literary luminaries such as Adam Zagajewski, Bei Dao, Tomas

Venclova, Adonis, and Natalya Gorbanevskaya. (Even the reclusive Wislawa Szymborska made a rare public appearance with her colleague Julia Hartwig at the medieval St Catherine's Church.) Meanwhile, the Jagiellonian University's Collegium Novum sponsored a week-long scholarly conference with seventy participants from around the world, including the eminent critics Helen Vendler and Clare Cavanagh, and some leading Polish scholars. The Jagiellonian Library, farther from the centre of town, exhibited manuscripts, photographs and first editions. The events were attended by thousands. All this year, books have poured from Polish publishers. Most notably, Milosz's own publisher, Znak, issued two hefty volumes: Andrzej Franaszek's 1,000-page biography – a bestseller – and a new 1,500-page Collected Poems. A few of the literati complained to me that Milosz was not receiving his due among the younger generation – an honoured marble bust to be dusted off seasonally, but not read or remembered – but I saw plenty of evidence to the contrary.

There were centenary events in Warsaw, Vilnius, Krasnogruda, Moscow, St Petersburg, Novosibirsk, Madrid, Bucharest, Paris, Rome and across the United Kingdom throughout the year. The fever was naturally less acute in the English-speaking world, but here the divide may indeed be more generational than linguistic. Milosz's former assistant Natalie Gerber, now a professor in New York, described the perils of presenting the poet's work to her undergraduates in *An Invisible Rope: Portraits of Czeslaw Milosz* (reviewed in the TLS, April 8, 2011): "Few have much experience with verse, and almost none have read poetry that overtly wrestles with conscience and historical circumstance, as does Milosz's, or, for that matter, poetry that requires its reader to work as hard as his does to understand both its literal meaning and its ethical import . . . [They] don't presume

that the morally complex and personally engaged stances taken by the speakers in Milosz's poems are even possible". At the conference in Cracow, Artur Sebastian Rosman, a doctoral student, recalled a discussion at the Elliott Bay Book Company in Seattle, devoted to Milosz. "All, and I mean all, of the Americans there were convinced that Milosz was most likely a postmodern spiritual seeker, probably much like them, possibly fascinated by archetypes, certainly spiritual, and definitely not religious." Had Milosz been there, said Rosman, he might have repeated his claim that his readers don't "take into account a particular, quite fundamental fact: all my intellectual impulses are religious and in that sense my poetry is religious".

At an evening reception in the Cracow Opera House, a prominent American poet cornered me to discuss David Orr's controversial claims in an article in the New York Times in 2009, which accused the Polish poet of "pompous nonsense that would be rightly skewered if it came from an American". In the same article, Orr tackled Robert Pinsky for his praise of Milosz's laughter. Pinsky had written, "The sound of it was infectious, but more precisely it was commanding. His laughter had the counter-authority of human intelligence, triumphing over the petty-minded authority of a regime". Orr's scalding riposte reverberated across the nation:

"That's one hell of a chuckle. The problem isn't that Pinsky likes and admires Milosz; it's that he can't hear a Polish poet snortle without having fantasies about barricades and firing squads. He's by no means alone in that. Many of us in the American poetry world have a habit of exalting foreign writers while turning them into cartoons."

Orr's criticism underscores how much the West has exhausted its fascination with the poetry of historical circumstance. As Robert Hass put it, readers "press their noses longingly against the window of people who have had dramatic historical experiences". But the comments also expose a fundamental misunderstanding. Orr's remarks reduce Milosz to a poet of witness, when he clearly wished to be considered a religious poet, and I would add that he is a poet of wonder as well.

Volumes of Milosz's letters have been published in Polish, but comparatively few in English. About a third of his poems also remain untranslated. The estate appears to be in a tangle, and scholars have complained that simple requests for permissions are met with silence or mishandled. This appears to be the fallout from the unexpected death of Milosz's decades-younger second wife, Carol Thigpen Milosz, in 2002. She had masterminded the complicated worldwide translation rights and ensured the widest possible audience for her husband's work. When Milosz died in 2004, the task fell abruptly to his elder son. This month has seen the publication of *Selected and Last Poems: 1931–2004*, in which *Selected Poems 1931–2004* (2006, translated principally by Hass) has been augmented by more than forty later poems never before published in English, all translated by Anthony Milosz himself.

At Queens College in New York, an audience member asked Hass what it was like spending decades translating Milosz. He answered: "Like being alive twice". Clearly, Hass is more attuned to the Pacific mystic who struggled to come to terms with the fierce surf, the sea-worn cliffs, and a fate that would have been unimaginable to his younger self. As Milosz wrote in "Magic Mountain":

So I won't have power, won't save the world?
 Fame will pass me by, no tiara, no crown?
 Did I then train myself, myself the Unique,
 To compose stanzas for gulls and sea haze,
 To listen to the foghorns blaring down below
 Until it passed. What passed? Life.

At the journalist Mark Danner's centenary celebration at Milosz's former home on Grizzly Peak Boulevard in the hills above Berkeley, on the small patio outside the house, a few read poems as the sun dropped beyond the

bay. It's the setting where Milosz became a universal poet, as well as a Polish one and (thanks to a team of able translators) an American one, too: "One murky island with its barking seals / Or a parched desert is enough / To make us say: yes, *oui, si*".

The Pacific marks the outermost geographic rim of Milosz's life, but it began in Seteniai, on the Niewia.a river, in rural Lithuania. Algirdas Avizienis, the director of the Czeslaw Milosz Birthplace Foundation, drove me to the destination an hour or so beyond Kaunas, past fields of rapeseed and miles of weeds. All this, he said, waving his arm towards the expanse, had been villages and forest. "The Soviets had a very different idea. Milosz was very disappointed, seeing how much had changed." The modest manor where Milosz was born has been demolished, but the old granary with its original beams has been restored and refurbished to serve as a writers' retreat and conference centre. Here a week of events was planned around Milosz's birthday on June 30. But before scholars, readers and tourists arrived one could get a sense of Milosz's lifelong enchantment with the lilac, church bells, wild strawberries, dandelions going to seed, the verdant slopes slanting towards the river fished by a few men on an idle afternoon. Here and there a devil is still said to roam; perhaps Milosz's *daimonion* still looks for him.

Milosz is buried at Cracow's Na Skalce Church – where famous and respected Poles are entombed, so the honour paid to Milosz ignited an angry firestorm, given the poet's Lithuanian roots and heretical leanings. The pope finally intervened to quash the acrimonious dispute. Now, all is quiet. The baroque church of Na Skalce nestles among the chestnut trees of a pleasant park, where blackbirds sing in the late afternoon. Visitors encounter white-robed Pauline monks who, at the words "Czeslaw Milosz", wave you towards the entry to the crypts. And beyond that? The poet Brenda Hillman, Hass's wife, said she had once asked Milosz, "What is heaven? What is it like?". To which the poet replied decisively, "Brenda, heaven is the third vodka".

Cynthia L. Haven writes for publications including the Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, San Francisco Chronicle and World Literature Today. Her *An Invisible Rope: Portraits of Czeslaw Milosz* was published earlier this year, while *Czeslaw Milosz: Conversations* appeared in 2006. She was a Milena Jesenská Fellow in Poland with Vienna's Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen.