Review of "The Witness of Poetry" by Nina Baym

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Toward the end of one of his reflective essays, Czeslaw Milosz remarks that he is certain of nothing but his amazement.¹ That remark is characteristic of Milosz, both in its tone and in the resigned, paradoxical vision it projects. A Polish exile and a professor of Slavic literatures, Milosz has lived for three decades in northern California, growing accustomed to the “fluid and the undefined.” Yet he has remained loyal to his origins by continuing to write in Polish, and he has retained the historical perspective of Eastern Europe, “where History is written with a capital H.” A classicist by temperament and training, Milosz nonetheless has conducted a running argument with the classical tradition, regarding classical form with a mixture of fascination and dislike. An amateur naturalist and a celebrant of scientific discovery, Milosz nevertheless has harsh words for the “cult of science,” with its depersonalizing outlook and its lack of moral valuation. And though he declares himself an optimist, he often sounds like a misanthrope, as when he describes his fellow human creatures as “beetles moving their mandibles in thousands of restaurants and taverns.” Viewed more closely, those beetles disturb him “as replicas and portraits of [his] own futility.”

Such tensions are central to Milosz’s thought. They animate his fiction and poetry, and they ripple the gentle contemplative surface of his personal essays. In the present book, a series of lectures on the social function of poetry, the dialectical character of Milosz’s mind is once again evident, especially as it contrasts with the apparent simplicity of his thesis. Reflecting on the work of his Polish wartime contemporaries, Milosz addresses the idea of poetry as “participant and witness” in “the major transformations of our time.” And the object of poetry, he suggests, is a “passionate pursuit of the Real.” As he unfolds this thesis, it turns out to be more problematical than it seems. What makes it so

¹See “Emigration to America: A Summing Up” in Visions from San Francisco Bay, trans. Richard Lourie (New York: Farrar, Strauss, 1982). Quotations in this paragraph are taken from this collection, which bears a close relationship to the book under review. Subsequent quotations will be identified in the text.
is not Milosz’s concept of poetry so much as his concept of “the Real”—a concept that makes the “pursuit of the Real” a difficult, if not impossible, venture.

For Milosz, “reality” is neither stable nor orderly. Its primary elements are disorder and movement. When Milosz speaks of disorder, he sometimes means primal disorder, that “chaos of disjointed masses we must arrange in some order, in some relation to one another . . . .” (Visions, 8). But more often he means the disorder visited by bullets and shells and occupying armies. As a native of Eastern Europe and a witness to the Warsaw uprising, Milosz knows all too well that “the established order . . . can cease to exist from one day to the next.” And that awareness shapes the modern poet’s art:

The poetic act changes with the amount of background reality embraced by the poet’s consciousness. In our century that background is, in my opinion, related to the fragility of those things we call civilization and culture. What surrounds us, here and now, is not guaranteed. It could just as well not exist—and so man constructs poetry of the remnants found in ruins.

From the vantage point of the House of Lords or the Bodleian Library, Milosz’s reflection may seem extreme. Not everyone finds civilization so insecure. But as Milosz admits, he is viewing the function of poetry from his “corner of Europe,” and the “extraordinary and lethal events” in that part of the world have given him a “peculiar perspective.”

They have also fostered a vision of reality as “Movement” and sharpened his sense of impermanence. As a survivor of political upheaval, Milosz has borne witness to cultural disintegration. And as an exile and emigrant, he has exchanged a sense of region for a sense of rootless possibility. In America he can no longer define himself in terms of a “knight’s castle, peasant’s hut, or burger’s store.” He has become Everyman and must define himself in a “universal fluidity, in a human collective in motion, composed of Everymen” (Visions, 207). And beyond the fluidity of roles which he feels as an immigrant, there is the more general flux of values, the relativity of beliefs, which he experiences as an inhabitant of the post-Darwinian century. For Milosz, one of the “lessons of biology,” as applied to human collectives, is the “fluidity of all standards, now universally felt.” Another is the principle of mortal struggle. In wartime Poland, Milosz recalls, “religion, philo-
phy, and art became suspect as accomplices in deceiving man with lofty ideas.... Only the biological seemed true.”

But if the primary element in a poet’s experience is a sense of disintegration, and if the biological perspective seems the truest, even to a poet, what are the implications for poetic vision and artistic truth? Is the poet more than adjunct to modern science?

Those are vexatious questions for Milosz, since to some extent he shares the scientific viewpoint. In his analytical writings (especially The Captive Mind) he adopts a tone of cool detachment, coining such terms “neo-Manichaeanism” and “ontological anemia” (an American malady) to describe cultural phenomena. And in his personal essays he speaks more than once of his early passion for botany, his love of nature books and atlases, his “hunger for demarcations.” Far from ridiculing or degrading the scientific method, he has celebrated those advances in science and technology which have made outer space seem “sublime” and have restored a sense of the miraculous. And in the present book he again takes the scientists’ part, arguing that it would be vain “to dream of an earth purged of science and technology” and that “nothing but the further development of science and technology can prevent the pollution of the natural environment and save the inhabitants of the planet from starvation.”

All the same, Milosz feels ill at ease in a world dominated by the scientific outlook. With a mixture of alarm and wan resignation, he notes the imbalance between the sciences and the humanities in the school curricula; and he laments the “erosion of belief in any world other than one submitted to a mathematical determinism.” As Milosz sees it, the triumph of the “scientific Weltanschauung” and the prevalence of social Darwinism have altered our perception of catastrophes and changed the “meaning of death.” We no longer view earthquakes and epidemics as God’s dispensations, nor do they affect us so profoundly. The responsibility for such disasters has been shifted from an Unmoved Mover to a chain of causes, and man has been reduced to an expendable speck, a “statistical cipher.” Religious belief has yielded to positivism; and religion itself has been “hollowed out from the inside,” leaving art as its ineffectual surrogate. Traditional values have been undermined, both by the valueless stance of the “cult of science” and by the failure of artists—the surrealists in particular—to assert a hierarchy of values. To reinforce his argument, Milosz quotes Simone Weil castigating her contemporaries for a “deficiency” in their “sense of
value.” But he also notes, somewhat apologetically, that in our century it is the “reactionaries . . . who are the rear guard defending a discrimi-
nation among values.”

The valueless “cult of science” has had a grave impact on the estate of poetry. For a poet, in Milosz’s view, is at heart a child, whose naive, unscientific outlook is a source of continual embarrassment:

Simone Weil was courageous. If she considered something true, she would say it, without fear of being labeled. . . . The poet of today . . . is too ashamed to attain such frankness. Of what is he ashamed? Of the child in himself who wants the earth to be flat, enclosed beneath the cupola of the sky, and who wants pairs of clearly drawn opposites to exist: truth and falsity, good and evil, beauty and ugliness. Unfortunately, he was taught in school that this is a naive image of the world and belongs to the past.

The poet’s schooling takes its toll. Like it or not, the poet acquires the scientific outlook; and for the majority of poets, poetry is a “continuation of their school notebooks or is, both literally and figuratively, written on their margins.” Science occupies the palace; and poetry finds itself relegated to the outskirts of civilized inquiry. At best, the poet “can organize his own subjective space,” but without much certainty. Nor can he expect posterity to look kindly upon his efforts. The relativism which makes beliefs provisional also makes the works of poets ephemeral.

A poem by Wislawa Szymborska, Milosz’s contemporary, underscores the point. Entitled “Autotomy,” the poem likens the condition of the poet to that of the holothurian, or sea cucumber, which divides itself when threatened by a predator. Like the holothurian, the endangered poet splits himself into two parts: a “doom and a salvation,” the “flesh and a broken whisper.” The flesh perishes; and the broken whisper, the laughter “quickly dying down,” is the poet’s work, which vanishes in the struggle for survival.

That is a discomfiting analogy, and, for this reader at least, it is unduly pessimistic. But for Milosz, Szymborska’s metaphor aptly portrays the role of the modern poet, whom the pernicious “cult of science” virtually dismisses, while robbing him of faith in his own posterity. Nor is that the end of the poet’s troubles. The dominance of science is only one of several obstacles blocking the “pursuit of the Real.” There is also
the “quarrel with classicism.” And there is the poet’s long-standing separation from the “human family.”

The quarrel with classicism, as Milosz defines it, is not to be confused with the much-heralded “anxiety of influence.” Here the focus is not on the anxiety of the poet in relation to his predecessors but on the truth and accuracy of the poet’s observations. To be sure, Milosz has had to contend with his classical forbears. As a schoolboy he translated Virgil, Horace, and Ovid; and as a modern Polish poet, he has had to come to terms with the classical influence in such authors as Jan Kochanowski (1530-84). But Milosz is troubled less by Oedipal conflicts in himself than by the obtrusive effects of classical conventions. Taking his cue from Auerbach’s Mimesis, he contends that classicism interferes with the “pursuit of the Real” by erecting a “glass wall of conventions” between the reader and the particulars of experience. As an instance he contrasts the paucity of domestic detail in the Augustan poets with the abundance of such detail in the works of the Gospel writers. From the classical author, he argues, we expect “good poetic craft on a given topic,” a reworking of “topoi universally known and fixed.” We do not expect surprises—or direct contact with naked fact. Thus the constraints of the classical tradition and the passion to name “what is real and unnamed” vie for the poet’s loyalty:

If I cross out a word and replace it with another, because in that way the line as a whole acquires more conciseness, I follow the practice of the classics. If, however, I cross out a word because it does not convey an observed detail, I lean toward realism.

The choice, as Milosz succinctly defines it, is between the “dictates of language and fidelity to the real.”

And how has Milosz settled his quarrel with classicism? Is realism compatible with the demands of traditional form? To address those questions Milosz offers an interpretation of one of his early poems (“No More”), in which classicism and realism clash. In this poem Milosz’s persona is an erstwhile realist, who once aspired to render the world in its abundant particulars but has since resigned himself to the role of conventional craftsman. No longer a radical, the speaker likens himself to the “many/ Merchants and artisans of Old Japan,/Who arranged verses about cherry blossoms,/Chrysanthemums and the moon.” Having recognized the inherent “insufficiency of words” and the impossibility
of attaining a "perfect mimesis," the poet abandons the pursuit of the Real and confines himself to the manipulation of traditional imagery:

Out of reluctant matter
What can be gathered? Nothing, beauty at best.
And so, cherry blossoms must suffice for us
And chrysanthemums and the full moon.

But will the persona's solution itself suffice? Will it reconcile the quarrel? For Milosz it will not, because his persona's attitude, however justified, represents a retreat into convention, a demotion of poetry to the level of "graceful writing." In his persona's tone, moreover, Milosz detects a "shade of irony"; and in retrospect he sees this early poem as an ironic defense of realism, a "declaration of disagreement" with classicism. Thus he remains committed to the "pursuit of the Real," even as he acknowledges the strength of convention and the difficulty of the realist's effort.

Of course, the very notion of literary conventions assumes some degree of congruity between the poet's language, values, and beliefs and those of the larger community. And as Milosz points out, no such congruity has existed since at least the middle of the nineteenth century. Drawing on a treatise by the poet Oscar Milosz—a distant but influential cousin—Milosz traces the decline of the poet's relationship with the common reader. As might be expected, the villain of the piece is the "unfortunate deviation" of Symbolism. For it was the preoccupation of the Symbolistes with "purely verbal finds constituted by unforeseen associations of words" which created a "schism and a misunderstanding" between the poet and the "great human family" (Oscar Milosz, quoted by Czeslaw Milosz). Poetry retreated into the "closed circle of subjectivism." And the poet became a bohemian, enamored of "pure" poetry and contemptuous of bourgeois values. The poet, in short, became an elitist, estranged from the larger community.

Milosz recalls three periods in recent history when the schism between the poet and the general public has been bridged, however briefly. One was the period of the German occupation in Poland, when poetry became as "essential as bread." Another was the period of social upheaval in America, the era of the Beats and the street poets, when poets and their audience drew somewhat closer. And a third was the
period of the workers’ strikes in Poland, the era of Solidarity, when, according to Milosz, it was “not unusual for 150,000 copies of a book of poems to be sold out in a few hours.” When misfortune strikes an entire community, Milosz observes, the barrier between poet and audience quickly collapses.

Such consolation is better than none. But on balance, it is not very consoling to hear that nothing short of a social earthquake will bring the poet and the human family back together. Nor are these lectures, as a whole, very heartening, though they end on an optimistic note. After his dark meditations on the prevalence of science, the quarrel with classicism, the decline of religion, and the isolation of the artist, Milosz ends with a lecture entitled “On Hope,” foreseeing in the next century a “radical turning away from the Weltanschauung marked principally by biology” and a “newly acquired historical consciousness,” nurtured by the proliferation of records and reproductions, the popularity of museums and galleries, and the advancement of technology, which “forces history out of the classroom” but “compensates, perhaps even generously, for what it is destroying.” Milosz predicts the emergence of a classless humanity, free of elitism, open to science and art, and preoccupied with finding “a key to its own enigma, and penetrating, through empathy, the soul of bygone generations and of whole civilizations.”

Ironically, such hope as Milosz offers can be found less in these visionary speculations than in the local facts which his generalities overlook. The Witness of Poetry, when all is said, resembles a treatise on poetics but might more accurately be described as the personal testament of a war-scarred Eastern European; and its generalizations, trenchant as they are, do not always sort well with Anglo-American realities. For one thing, the quarrel with classicism, if it exists at all, seems less than urgent in contemporary American poetry. Except in such learned poets as Hollander, Nemerov, Hecht, and Hine, where the weight of classical precedent and the force of the English tradition can often be keenly felt, the quarrels of post-war American poets have been less with classicism than with the legacies of modernism, the theories of Olson and Bly, and the example of Williams, Stevens, and Pound. And even the poet’s estrangement from the “human family”—a fact no contemporary poet would deny—seems less extreme than Milosz describes. One thinks of the popular followings of such poets as Heaney, Larkin, Hughes, Stafford, Rich, and (more recently) Carolyn Forché.
Of course, these exceptions may prove the rule. And for American poets the real value of Milosz’s generalities may lie in their tendency to make the American situation look unique. Perhaps American poetry could use a serious quarrel with classicism. Perhaps the “lesson of biology” has yet to be learned on this side of the Atlantic. And perhaps the estate of American poetry is both more fortunate and less stable than it seems. In his autobiography, Milosz recalls his amazement at meeting Americans who thought their houses, buildings, and other creations were built to last. To such glad visions the poet of History provides a stern corrective.