



A few hundred people participated in the demonstration in Poznań. The invited speakers made fiery antigovernment speeches. Toward the end there were scuffles between pseudofootball fans and anarchists, and between anarchists and the police. Have the foreigners living in Poland benefited in any way from the demonstration? Probably not, since that was not the point of the whole affair. The reason for this demonstration and probably many others has been the opposition's inability to create a credible political program assuring its return to power in the nearest democratic election. The unfolding of the numerous corruption cases that has been going on in Poland in mid-2017, starting with the Amber Gold affair, makes this supposition probable. In the recent opinion polls PiS leads over the rest of political parties. According to poll results conducted by TNS Polska between June 3–8, 2017, PiS is supported by 40 percent, PO by 17 percent, and Nowoczesna and Kukiz-15 by 9 percent of respondents

<http://wpolityce.pl/polityka/296643-pogrom-tns-polska-pis-z-40-proc-poparciem-miazdzy-rywali-platforma-17-nowoczesna-tylko-9-sprawdz-wyniki>, accessed 07/01/2017).

The solid public support for the rightist-conservative government that has introduced social reforms that have diminished economic inequalities is the reason that the opposition has been testing nondemocratic means of action as possibly the only way to lower public support for the present government. Δ

Miłosz, Eliot, and the Generative Canon Literature, the Past, and the Future

Peter Dale Scott

“The poetic act both anticipates the future and speeds its coming.”¹

MIŁOSZ, ELIOT. AND THE CANON

In his lecture accepting the Nobel Prize in 1980, Czesław Miłosz acknowledged his debt to authors preceding him like William Blake, and also his duty to maintain their tradition by rescuing it from what was now dated:

Those who are alive receive a mandate from those who are silent forever. They can fulfill their duties only by trying to reconstruct precisely things as they were and by wresting the past from fictions and legends.²

In acknowledging a poet's obligation to what we now commonly call the literary canon, Miłosz was following in the footsteps of T. S. Eliot. Eliot also argued that great creativity came from incorporating tradition, not from just breaking with it. In his seminal essay of 1919, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot argued that "the best, the most individual parts of [the poet's] work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously."³ Eliot saw tradition as a whole as an "ideal order," and he saw new works as rejuvenating a past: "What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art that preceded it."⁴ In the essay this emphasis on the past leads to a polemical argument for "Classicism" (obedience to "outside authority") as opposed to "Romanticism" (inspiration from an "inner voice," which according to Eliot "breathes the eternal message of vanity, fear, and lust").⁵

Here we come to a paradox. In his Nobel speech Miłosz endorsed what Eliot wrote about—the need to learn from poets of the past. But where Eliot was concerned with great poetry rejuvenating past poetry, Miłosz was concerned with it escaping the past and offering hope to advance a future society. This brought him to take issue with Eliot. A believer in his own *daimonion* or inner voice, he did much to elevate the canonic authority of Blake, Whitman, and others whom Eliot had marginalized. In short, Miłosz redefined the canon established before him by his semblable, T. S. Eliot, much as Eliot had redefined the notion of culture established before him by his semblable, Matthew Arnold. Miłosz was heavily influenced by Eliot, especially after having translated "The Waste Land" into Polish. Both men became famous for their alienated depictions of their war-torn century, and also for their tantalizing glimpses of a spiritual alternative to it. Both men in diverse ways considered themselves Catholics; unlike many of their colleagues, both regularly

took Communion—though, as we shall see, for opposite reasons.

—

I now see Miłosz as a response and important corrective to Eliot's important but decidedly idiosyncratic view of tradition, which itself can be seen as a corrective to the idiosyncratic perspectives of Blake.

—

Both men were deeply critical of the provincial cultures in the remote regions of Missouri and Lithuania where they were born. However, their provincial origins enabled them to come to the masterpieces of European literature, as had Goethe and Schiller before them, as *outsiders*, the more able to see great literature in perspective, and thus wish to rescue tradition from an uncritical status quo.⁶ On a deeper level, both men believed in the doubleness of the human condition: that all of us exist in a fallen everyday world but also have access to a higher order of being, or what Miłosz called a "second space." This led in both men to an oscillation between pessimism and hope. Miłosz's quarrel with Eliot was in part a debate within himself. More than that, I believe, it was a quarrel at the dialectical heart of Western culture, perhaps at the heart of all literate cultures.

Eliot's praise of a Eurocentric "ideal order" has frequently been criticized as too static, underestimating the degree to which its tradition was to be dialectical and even anti-traditional, in what Octavio Paz once called "a tradition against itself."⁷ Once we read Eliot from this perspective we can see that Eliot's critique of moribund Romanticism was itself a valid part of that anti-traditional tradition. So, in the same spirit, was Miłosz's later critique of moribund classicism.

I would like to consider Eliot, Miłosz, and the tradition they both cared for, as not just a recuperative but a generative tradition. Although it has taken me many readings, I have slowly come to see Miłosz's *Witness of Poetry* as a seminal correction to the polemics of Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent," just as Eliot's essay had been a seminal correction of the decadent Romantic critic Middleton Murry.

I say “correction” because so many of Eliot’s early critical assessments were not only idiosyncratic but untenable. For example, Eliot himself revised his earlier downplaying of Milton and Goethe, just as his decade of efforts to define himself as “a royalist in politics” ended in the 1935 crisis of Edward VIII’s abdication when, like most, he chose the voice of the Church over that of the Crown.⁸

THE WITNESS OF POETRY

Winning a Nobel Prize is not always good for poets. However, in Miłosz’s case it revived ambitions for poetry that he had voiced earlier in the bardic tradition of Poland, where for over a century poets had preserved the integrity of a nation that had lost its sovereignty and government.⁹ The most memorable example is his 1945 poem “Dedication” (“Przedmowa”) about which he was later deeply ambivalent:

What is poetry which does not save
Nations or peoples?
A connivance with official lies,
A song of drunkards whose throats will be cut in a
moment. . . .¹⁰

In his middle years Miłosz distanced himself from such extreme ambitions, especially after moving to California, where until 1980 he was relatively unknown and remote from his readership. A Marxist in his youth, he later criticized secular Marxism, and for—as Robert Hass neatly summarized it—valuing “becoming more than it valued being.”¹¹

After the Nobel Prize Miłosz began to write in a style that was more confident, optimistic, and suited for a global rather than a narrowly Polish audience. We see this change in the series of Harvard lectures published in 1983 as *The Witness of Poetry*. Here Miłosz developed what he had said earlier about a poet’s role in extracting the future from the past. In his words, “The poetic act both anticipates the future and speeds its coming.” Miłosz hoped for a literature that would supersede a prevalent pseudoscientific “reductionist Weltanschauung,” one afflicting the entire present era.¹² In short, the canon should help prepare for the future, not just restore the past.

In *The Witness of Poetry* Miłosz situated Polish poetry in the larger context of “our [European and American] civilization, shaped as it is by the Bible and, for that reason, eschatological to the core.”¹³ Both here and in the more radical book *The Land of Ulro*, Miłosz was explicitly following both Blake and especially the great Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz. As Miłosz explained in *Witness*, Poland, precisely because of recent historic experiences “comparable only to violent earthquakes, offers a peculiar perspective” on poetry.¹⁴ Through two centuries of oppression from abroad, “Polish poetry became a home for incorrigible hope, immune to historical disasters.”¹⁵ In this way Polish poetry preserved the spirit found in Blake’s “prophecies on the victory of man in his struggle against the night.”¹⁶ This spirit is vital: “The fate of poetry depends on whether such a work as Schiller’s and Beethoven’s *Ode to Joy* is possible. For that to be so, some basic confidence is needed, a sense of open space ahead of the individual and the human species.”¹⁷

To exemplify this “sense of open space ahead,” Miłosz looks first to Walt Whitman, a poet for whom the future was as open as it had been in both the Age of Reason (Schiller) and in the Age of Raptures (the Romantics).¹⁸ Miłosz’s example from the latter age is *Pan Tadeusz* by Mickiewicz, which “seems to draw its strength from a belief in the basic goodness of the world sustained by the hand of God and by the poetry of country people.”¹⁹ Its verse was “shaped [like all Polish poetry] by Latin classicism” and it was also marked, like the Enlightenment before him, by “a basic optimism toward the future, a millenarian faith in the Epoch of the Spirit.”²⁰ Right after the Second World War Miłosz had similarly argued that the social function of poetry was to sustain an Arcadian dream of “universal happiness”: “Sometimes the world loses its face. It becomes too base. The task of the poet is to restore its face, because otherwise man is lost in doubt and despair. It is an indication that the world need not always be like this, it can be different.”²¹

Seeing his own era through the eyes of his francophone Lithuanian cousin the poet Oscar Miłosz, Czesław Miłosz claims in *Witness* that Western poetry has lost its sense of “an open

space ahead.” He criticizes the “pessimism, sarcasm, bitterness, and doubt” of twentieth-century literature, which had withdrawn “from the domain common to all people into the closed circle of subjectivism.”²² Defending with Blake the naïve imagination, Miłosz emphasizes the importance of “saving” humanity from “images of a totally ‘objective,’ cold, indifferent world from which the Divine Imagination has been alienated.”²³ In his last chapter he argues for a return to a different poetry, one that supplies a hope grounded in “the dimension of the past of our human race.”²⁴

MIŁOSZ’S QUARREL WITH VIRGIL

I warmly endorse what I see as Miłosz’s argument in effect for a poetry that participates in an ongoing dialogue with canonical tradition, engaging in humanity’s past and future. I do so as a North American who stumbled on the classics belatedly and mostly by accident, just as I came on my own from an agnostic household to an awareness of meditative and religious experience. Miłosz opens his lectures by describing how from childhood he was forced to study what I had to discover for myself: “In the gymnasium for several years I studied. . . the history of the Roman Church and dogmatics . . . Also classicism, the subject of both my fascination and my dislike, has its origin in Horace, Virgil, and Ovid, whom I read and translated in class.”²⁵ Thus his and my attitudes towards Virgil, and for that matter religion, were very different. Neither was part of my world, but shone remotely like Platonic ideas outside the cave of my fallen existence, but both religion and classicism had significantly shaped the world in which Miłosz grew up, and in ways not always to his liking.

Elsewhere I have assimilated Miłosz to what in American university curricula is often called “the classical tradition” of Virgil, Dante, Milton, and Blake. As mentioned earlier, I prefer to call it the “generative canon,” the continuous redefinition of our culture’s core that supplies new commonplaces with which authors can agree or dissent. But while in *The Witness of Poetry* Dante and Blake are repeatedly offered as models of inspiration, Virgil is only mentioned once again, and negatively. This

occurs in the course of an entire chapter titled “A Quarrel with Classicism.”²⁶ We need to explore the informative reasons why Miłosz, in these lectures and elsewhere, takes issue with his obvious forebear Virgil (and also with T. S. Eliot), but before exploring these differences, let us acknowledge the similarities. In the words of Seamus Heaney, “Miłosz. . . will renege neither on his glimpse of heaven upon earth nor on his knowledge that the world is a vale of tears. There is something Virgilian in this combination of tender-minded susceptibility and melancholy understanding.”²⁷

CLASSICISM, CLASS, AND HUMANITY

Miłosz did not see classicism as a living tradition leading to Dante and himself, but as a dead one in antiquity from which one needs to separate. He writes that “the poetics of classicism” are “alien to a poet of today, but also intriguing in their strangeness.”²⁸ In the essay he proceeds to describe the Latin classics as a mark of a privileged class, not accessible (as he is arguing poetry should be) to “the great human family.”²⁹ The Latin classics were indeed what distinguished him as a student in Wilno from the peasants he left behind on his father’s estate.³⁰ To sustain his quarrel with classicism, Miłosz quotes from Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis*, written while Auerbach was isolated from libraries in Turkey during the Second World War. “In antiquity,” Auerbach writes, “the question of style became really acute when the spread of Christianity exposed Holy Scripture, and Christian literature in general, to the aesthetic criticism of highly educated pagans. They were horrified at the claim that the highest truths were contained in writings composed in a language to their minds impossibly uncivilized and in total ignorance of [the] stylistic categories.” Miłosz adds, “But it is precisely for this reason that we learn more of everyday life in the Roman empire from the Gospels than from the Latin poetry of the Golden Age. Horace and Virgil so filter and distill their material that we can only guess at some of the down-to-earth data hidden behind their lines.”³¹ Miłosz thus sees the classics as a literature shared only by a privileged class, one that is protected from experience and isolated from the audience of the general public and also from their sufferings.

“Mankind has always been divided by one rule into two species: *those who know and do not speak and those who speak and do not know*. This formula can be seen as an allusion to the dialectic of master and slave, because it invokes centuries of ignorance and misery among serfs, peasants, and proletarians who alone knew the cruelty of life in all its nakedness but had to keep it to themselves. The skill of reading and writing was the privilege of the few whose sense of life was made comfortable by power and wealth.”³² This separation is one Miłosz remembers from his own childhood. Elsewhere he has written in prose about his “shame that I came from a family which had lived for generations off the labor of the common people.”³³ The same sentiment underlies his deeply personal and important late poem “Treatise on Theology,” in which he laments his growing alienation through learning from the peasants of his parish—“The opposition, I versus they, seemed immoral”—and in the end revived the tepidity of his own faith with the “vein of ecstasy” of those singing and praying at Lourdes:

Naturally, I am a skeptic. Yet I sing with them,
thus overcoming the contradiction
between my private religion and the religion of the rite.³⁴

Throughout his life Miłosz strove to overcome the schism, described by his mentor Oscar Miłosz, “between the poet and the great human family.”³⁵ In *Witness* he explains that his purpose “is to make clear . . . that, roughly described, a quarrel exists between classicism and realism. This is a clash of two tendencies independent of the literary fashions of a given period and of the shifting meanings of those two terms. These two opposed tendencies usually also coexist within one person.” Miłosz illustrated this doubleness in himself in his poem “No More,” where he saw himself as an artisan “who arranged verses about cherry blossoms,” failing to find adequate words “in a graveyard whose gates are licked by greasy water.” The poet accepts this inability at the end: “so, cherry blossoms must suffice for us.”³⁶ More affirmatively, he transcends the disjunction in the poem “Dante” in which, looking at a woman sitting at the edge of a bathtub (“Theodora,/

Elvira, or Julia, whatever the name/ Of her with whom I sleep and play chess”), he addresses Dante and concludes

only, as once for you, this remains real:
*La concreata e perpetua sete,**
The inborn and the perpetual desire
Del deiformo regno – for a God-like domain,
A realm or a kingdom. There is my home.
I cannot help it. I pray for light,
For the inside of the eternal pearl. *L’eterna margarita.*³⁷

* Dante, *Paradiso* 2:19

MIŁOSZ’S QUARREL WITH ELIOT

In thus grounding a vision of a “second space” in a setting of sordid casual sex, it is obvious to me that Miłosz was drawing on the precedent and style of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, the poem he translated while the Germans were systematically demolishing what remained of Warsaw after the 1944 Uprising.

This analogy barely begins to encompass the similarities between the two poets. For example, I cannot read Miłosz’s late confessional poem “Here walks a many-tiered man. . . frightened of a verdict, / now, for instance, / or after his death” without thinking of Eliot as Pound reported him in the *Cantos*, saying, “I am afraid of the life after death.”³⁸ Tinged with pessimism after the experience of tragic wars, both poets express irritation at what Miłosz once called the “shameful ‘progressive’ nonsense”³⁹ of liberals (like myself). Both poets considered themselves Catholic and came from strongly religious backgrounds in remote regions. But whereas Eliot distanced himself strenuously from the optimistic Unitarianism of St. Louis, Miłosz found nourishment by returning to the simple piety of his birthplace in Lithuania. This led to a more serious difference: Miłosz was born into the gentry, but strove hard to reduce the gap between himself and the less privileged; Eliot’s roots were Midwestern and middle class, which he strove hard to transcend by reinventing himself as a factitious English Tory.

Many critics have recognized the pervasive influence of Eliot’s techniques and values on Miłosz.⁴⁰ It was thus a surprise for me on my first reading of *The Witness of Poetry* to find Eliot treated even more disparagingly than

Virgil. There Miłosz criticizes *The Waste Land* for having lost the vision of an open space in the human future that animated first Schiller and then Whitman: “It is difficult to find any tomorrow in T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*.”⁴¹ Later he alleges that “in Eliot and to some extent in Pound a certain norm is placed in the past, the model of time is regressive, the future does not promise anything good.”⁴² Admittedly Eliot, like Miłosz himself, was pessimistic about the course of time, but this summary judgment of him seems unfair on first reading, the more so from a man who elsewhere could admire the poetry of both Jeffers and Ginsberg, and who once wrote that “the more harshly we judge human life as a hopeless undertaking and the more we rid ourselves of illusions, the closer we are to the truth.”⁴³

I do believe that Miłosz’s summary judgment of *The Waste Land* fails to do it justice. Elsewhere Miłosz admires Eliot for his “oppositional stance” in an age of decadent secularism.⁴⁴ On the other hand, as I said at the outset of this essay, Eliot in his criticism was idiosyncratically fixated on a poet’s relationship to the past, rather than (like Blake or Miłosz) to the future. Over the course of time I have thus come to internalize Miłosz’s overall assessment of Eliot, who was once so important to me that he was the subject of my dissertation.

We need to understand that in his Harvard lectures Miłosz was not seriously evaluating any single poet, but making an Eastern European case against the “separation of art and the public” that in his eyes had afflicted culture since the retreat of poets into Bohemia (and more recently the universities) starting in the nineteenth century.⁴⁵ In his earlier “Reflections on T.S. Eliot” he had assessed Eliot’s work as a hopeful “attempt at learning that the imagination, and also religious poetry, can regain [their] privileges,” lost since the age of Dante.⁴⁶ The real issue with Eliot at that time that Miłosz raises did not concern his pessimism but his style: “The poetics he [Eliot] chose made him an ‘obscure’ poet, and some of his digressions, such as those in *Four Quartets*, are indecipherable without resort to the often dubious assistance of his commentators.”⁴⁷

Even here the real issue was not so much with Eliot himself as with his complex but powerful influence. In Eliot’s shadow, Miłosz wrote, “American poetry fell ill; excessive straining for high culture and a fear of simplicity of expression are not, as a rule, healthy for poetry.”⁴⁸ This hostility to “highbrow” literature is echoed in his extended criticism in *Witness* of “the separation of art and the public” in the West; and his comment in his Nobel lecture that “theories of literature as *écriture*, of speech feeding on itself” are conducive to “the growth of the totalitarian state.”⁴⁹

Here we can see Miłosz’s quarrel with elitist classicism mirrored in his quarrel with Eliot. It is a quarrel that is not limited to style, but extends to their different attitudes toward spirituality and indeed society. We have already seen that Miłosz’s Catholicism was a reaffirmation of his links to the people among whom he was born; in sharp contrast Eliot’s Anglo-Catholicism was a way of distancing himself from the Unitarianism of his family and surroundings in St. Louis. In Eliot’s famous profession of his new values—“an Anglo-Catholic in religion, a classicist in literature and a royalist in politics”—all three terms stand out as deliberately and provocatively *unpopular*.

Miłosz once commented on the poetry of Philip Larkin, “That emptiness and cruelty, which is the basis of Larkin’s *Weltanschauung*, should be accepted as a basis on which you work *toward* something light.”⁵⁰ Intelligent evaluators have seen Eliot’s work as a lifelong striving towards something light, indeed a “heart of light.”⁵¹ But if poetry is to “change nations and peoples,” I can see how Eliot’s contorted and unhelpful spirituality, together with his self-professed classicism, might have struck Miłosz as too refined and elitist to be serviceable for society.

THE LIMITS OF CLASSICISM

I myself am far too deeply indebted to Eliot to distance myself from him in this way, but Miłosz’s Harvard lectures have persuaded me that the term “classicism” distorts what I see as the generative canon of Homer, Virgil, Dante, Wordsworth, Eliot, and Miłosz. Both in its history and in its current meaning, “classicism”

is too partial, too identified with and restricted to the pagan authors that, from an early age, monastic schools chose to enhance the spiritual legacy of the Old and New Testaments. The sharp disjunction seen by Matthew Arnold between Hellenism on the one hand and Hebraism on the other is reflected in American institutions today—not just in the sharp contrast between schools and churches, but in the Classics Departments of the universities, which consider it quite appropriate to study Sanskrit texts but never the Bible.

We return to where we began: Miłosz's accurate description of Western civilization, as shaped "by the Bible and, for that reason, eschatological to the core."⁵² That awareness was existential for him in Lithuania and Poland where his Latinity made him somewhat an outsider, while Catholicism has remained widespread, even after decades of half-hearted communist efforts to extirpate it. This awareness was reinforced in him by Mickiewicz. *Pan Tadeusz*, perhaps the greatest recent epic in the Western lineage, is also perhaps the first epic in the classical tradition to incorporate the point of view of the Book of Exodus, seeing a foreign army of occupation from below, as alien to the culture that matters, not as embodying it. Because of the peripheral status of the Polish language, *Pan Tadeusz* is unlikely ever to achieve a similarly central status in the Western canon. However, Miłosz has helped strengthen for the generative canon its peasant's-eye biblical perspective—that the future of God's people, once and still now and forever, depends on release from Pharaoh, not on becoming Pharaoh.

CLASSICISM AND THE GENERATIVE CANON

In every generation, but perhaps especially in times of profound and traumatic change, poets face the task of readjusting the relationship of the past to the future. Each great poet offers his/her own personal (and often idiosyncratic) solution to the dilemma of reconciling the old and the new, as defined by correcting his or her antecedents. I now see Miłosz as a response and important corrective to Eliot's important but decidedly idiosyncratic view of tradition, which itself can be seen as a corrective to the idiosyncratic perspectives of Blake, who wrote

that Milton came to him in Lambeth in the form of a falling star, and entered his left foot.⁵³ It is worth recalling Eliot's famous dissent from what he described in Blake as "the crankiness, the eccentricity, which frequently affects writers outside of the Latin traditions." What Blake's "genius required," Eliot continued, "and what it sadly lacked, was a framework of accepted and traditional ideas which would have prevented him from indulging in a philosophy of his own, and concentrated his attention upon the problems of the poet. Confusion of thought, emotion, and vision is . . . eminently not a Latin virtue. The concentration resulting from a framework of mythology and theology and philosophy is one of the reasons why Dante is a classic, and Blake only a poet of genius."⁵⁴ Miłosz, both a born Catholic and also even more of a geographic outsider from Latin Europe than Blake or Eliot, has I think achieved a far more balanced incorporation of Blake into the generative tradition. He recognizes what the royalist classicist Eliot ignored: the importance of Blake's compassion for "those who know and do not speak:" "William Blake combats the diabolic vassal of inertia responsible for the inhuman industrialization of England, or, as Allen Ginsberg calls it, 'Moloch whose name is the mind.'"⁵⁵ In the close to his Nobel Lecture of 1980, Miłosz acknowledged Blake as one of three writers from whom he has received a mandate: "Our century. . . has also been a century of faith and hope. A profound transformation, of which we are hardly aware, because we are a part of it, has been taking place, coming to the surface from time to time in phenomena that provoke general astonishment. . . For we all who are here, both the speaker and you who listen, are no more than links between the past and the future."⁵⁶

My own hope is that posterity will agree with Joseph Brodsky's judgment that "Czesław Miłosz is one of the greatest poets of our time;" and that his works will be recognized as classics. I would make this claim in particular for *The Witness of Poetry*. Despite its Polish perspective, it is in the tradition of Sidney's *An Apology for Poetry*, Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind*, Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry*, and Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual

Talent,” with the difference that it is at present more useful than any of these for pointing out our own open space ahead.

THE GENERATIVE CANON AND HUMAN PROGRESS: A PERSONAL CONCLUSION

It is significant that both Eliot and Miłosz, like Virgil, Dante, Milton, and Blake before them, wrote their defining works in a context of great social upheaval. Eliot finished *The Waste Land* in a Swiss asylum after World War 1, while Miłosz wrote his wartime poems after hiding from Nazi machine-gun fire in the streets of Warsaw. Like their predecessors, in their works both poets were coping with the loss of social structures that were precious to them. Both believed that their eras had been misled by false visions of progress and both were determined to rescue precious values from a decaying past to rectify the present. Eliot would write later in *Little Gidding*, with the failures of both King Charles and the Commonwealth in mind,

We have taken from the defeated
What they had to leave us—a symbol:
A symbol perfected in death.
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well.⁵⁷

In a Warsaw war poem Miłosz wrote

where the wind
Blowing from the Vistula scatters
The red dust of the rubble
ends in a similar but more hopeful vein:
I want to sing of festivities,
The greenwood into which Shakespeare
Often took me. Leave
To poets a moment of happiness,
Otherwise your world will perish.⁵⁸

I believe we can see the whole of the generative canon as performing a similar task: extracting from the setbacks of history something of value for a better future. Seen in this light, the canon is itself a record of human history but on a higher and happier level, one where progress is possible. The canon itself may suffer setbacks in time but its achievements, unlike those of mere empires, can be carried forward in human memories, and even enhanced there. The result can then uplift society as a whole, as when the tacit republicanism of Milton’s epic, which was read by a large and diverse audience, contributed

to the American revolution.⁵⁹ More recently, Miłosz’s poems and prose helped inspire the Polish Solidarity movement as it ousted a Soviet-installed government in Warsaw.⁶⁰

I once wrote an entire book on Dark Age Pastoral, arguing that the poems of Virgil and others helped guide a recovery to a civilization on a higher level, relatively purified of slavery and gladiatorial amusements. The evidence of commentaries suggests that after the Dark Ages Virgil’s text was being read more deeply than his contemporaries were ever capable of doing, hence Dante.

To combat the sickness of Nazi barbarism in World War 2, the German scholar Bruno Snell wrote the seminal work *The Discovery of the Mind*.⁶¹ In it he discusses how awareness of inner mental life, a notion not to be found in Homer, slowly evolved in literature toward its articulation by Virgil. In contrast to the earthy bucolics of Theocritus, Snell saw Virgil’s Arcadia as a “spiritual landscape,” “an earthly beyond, a land of the soul yearning for its distant home in the past.”⁶² “We should realize,” Snell wrote, “that [the] modern poet, the poet of fancies and dreams, did not exist until he saw the light of day in Virgil’s Arcadia.”⁶³ I see the generative canon as continuing this venture into the richness of the imagination, an ongoing advance toward a more civilized society with more civilized humans. In this search both Eliot and Miłosz played an important role. Δ

NOTES

¹ Czesław Miłosz, *The Witness of Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1983), 109.

² Czesław Miłosz, Nobel Lecture, Stockholm, December 8, 1980, http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1980/milosz-lecture.html.

³ T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1949), 14.

⁴ Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 15.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶ See Jan Gorak, *The Making of the Modern Canon* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1991), 52–80. In Gorak’s words, “Eliot’s development . . . indicates yet again that the modern canon is the product of a deeply anti-canonical spirit” (79).

⁷ Octavio Paz, *Children of the Mire: Modern Poetry from Romanticism to the Avant-garde*

(Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1974), 1. Cf. Michael Palmer, *Active Boundaries: Selected Essays and Talks* (New York: New Directions, 2008), 106 f.

⁸ For details, see Peter Dale Scott, "The Social Critic and His Discontents" in *The Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot*, ed. by A. David Moody (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994), 70. Miłosz also could modify his assessments. Although he once paid considerable attention to Swedenborg, to whom Blake, Dostoevsky and his cousin Oscar Miłosz were indebted, he himself later discounted Swedenborg's "pedantic prose" (Czesław Miłosz, *Miłosz's ABC's* trans. Madeleine Levine (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 276–77.

⁹ Although Miłosz's concept of a *wieszcz* or bard is profoundly Polish, it can also be found in the *Democratic Vistas* of Walt Whitman, whom Miłosz read at an early age in a Polish translation: "I demand races of orbic bards, with unconditional uncompromising sway. Come forth, sweet democratic despots of the west!"

¹⁰ Czesław Miłosz, "Dedication," in *New and Collected Poems: 1931-2001* (New York: Ecco, 2003), 77. I have translated *ludzi* in the second line as "peoples" rather than the anticlimactic "people". Miłosz ultimately dropped *Przedmowa* altogether from the Polish edition of his *Selected Poems*. Czesław Miłosz, *Wiersze Wybranie* (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1996).

¹¹ Robert Hass, *What Light Can Do: Essays on Art, Imagination, and the Natural World* (New York: Ecco, 2012), 153.

¹² Czesław Miłosz, *The Witness of Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1983), 109.

¹³ Miłosz, *The Witness of Poetry*, 37.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 13. Though in *Witness* Miłosz defined poetry as "a passionate pursuit of the Real" (p. 25), he recognized elsewhere that *Pan Tadeusz*, written with the goal "to fortify the heart," "is a fairy tale, an idyll, an embellishment." Czesław Miłosz, *A Year of the Hunter*, trans. Madeleine Levine (New York: Noonday Press, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 363. "The Real," for Miłosz, is Platonic rather than scientific.

²⁰ Miłosz, *The Witness of Poetry*, 13–14.

²¹ Miłosz, "A Semi-Private Letter about Poetry" [1946], in Czesław Miłosz, *To Begin Where I Am: Selected Essays* ed. Bogdana Carpenter and

Madeleine Levine (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 348, 350.

²² Miłosz, *The Witness of Poetry*, 26. Cf. Czesław Miłosz, *A Year of the Hunter* trans. Madeleine Levine (New York: Noonday Press, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 211: "I am still the poet who knows and struggles against the subjectivism of contemporary poetry."

²³ Miłosz, *The Witness of Poetry*, 47.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 109. Cf. p. 114: "From where will a renewal come to us, to us who have devastated the whole earthly globe?" asked Simone Weil. "Only from the past, if we love it."

²⁵ Miłosz, *The Witness of Poetry*, 5.

²⁶ In this lecture Miłosz talked as if unaware of Blake's earlier invective against "The Stolen and Perverted Writings of Homer & Ovid, of Plato & Cicero, which all Men ought to condemn." William Blake, "Milton," *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Nonesuch Press, 1927), 375.

²⁷ Seamus Heaney, "Secular and Millennial Miłosz," in Seamus Heaney, *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971–2001* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2002), 445. Like other critics, Heaney compares Miłosz's "naïve" pastoral sequence, "The World," to Virgil's *Eclogues*, also written in a time of war (445–46: "As in the case of Virgil," he concludes, the felicity of the art was in itself a heart-breaking reminder of the desolation of the times." Cf. *Virgil's Eclogues*, edited by Katharina Volk (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008), 254–55.

²⁸ Miłosz, *The Witness of Poetry*, 62.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 65–67; cf. 31, 37.

³⁰ The clash between Latin and vernacular had religious and political significances. Cf. Czesław Miłosz, *The History of Polish Literature* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1983), xv–xvi: "The vernacular, stifled for a long time by Latin, the language of the Church, won its ascendancy in Poland primarily thanks to the religious controversies engendered first by the ideas of Jan Hus, then by Luther's and Calvin's. Poland of the "Golden Age" was largely a Protestant country, a 'paradise for heretics.' And despite the subsequent victories of the Counter Reformation, the heritage of intellectual rebelliousness has never been lost, and was transmitted through the publicists of the Enlightenment and the democrats of the nineteenth century to the liberal intelligentsia of our time." Miłosz liked to tell me of the Polish intellectuals like Samuel Hartlib who, at the time of the Counter Reformation, migrated to London (where Hartlib befriended both Milton and Robert Boyle of the future Royal Society). Meanwhile, the Polish urban

middle class was diminished, a fact contributing to the disappearance in 1795 of the reactionary Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth.

³¹ Miłosz, *The Witness of Poetry*, 63; quoting Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* trans. by Willard Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968), 154.

³² Miłosz, *The Witness of Poetry*, 66–67. Cf. Miłosz, *A Year of the Hunter*, 135: “Poland is a country of unheard-of caste differences, from heights such as are rarely met with elsewhere, to depressing lower depths, and perhaps the most powerful strata are the two extremes.”

³³ Miłosz, *Milosz's ABC's*, 204.

³⁴ “Treatise on Theology,” in Czesław Miłosz, *Second Space: New Poems*, trans. by the author and Robert Hass (New York: Ecco, 2004), 47, 48, 62–63. This poem, “Traktat Teologiczny,” completes a trilogy of Miłoszian “Tractates,” the other two being his “Traktat moralny” (“Treatise on Morals,” not yet translated into English) and “Traktat Poetycki” (“A Treatise on Poetry.” *New and Collected Poems*, 107–51).

³⁵ So much more so than Oscar himself, who when translating Lithuanian myths resorted “to such masters of literary representation as Homer, Virgil, Dante Alighieri, Johan von Goethe, William Shakespeare, Edgar Allan Poe, Henry Wordsworth Longfellow, Daniel Defoe, Voltaire and others. Thus, the [Oscar] Miłoszian texts restructure the picture of the Lithuanian audience from ancient rural (i.e. peasant/primitive) into elite (i.e.

aristocratic/learned),” Jadvyga Krūminienė, “Oscar Miłosz as Translator: Playing Games with Memory,” <https://www.google.com/webhp?sourceid=chrome-instant&ion=1&espv=2&ie=UTF-8#q=Jadvyga+Kr%C5%ABminien%C4%97%2C+%E2%80%9COscar+Mi%C5%82osz+As+Translator%3A+Playing+Games+With+Memory%2C%E2%80%9D>

³⁶ “No More,” in Czesław Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems*, 168; Miłosz, *The Witness of Poetry*, 72.

³⁷ “Dante,” in Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems*, 567.

³⁸ Miłosz, “Many-Tiered Man,” *Second Space*, 34; Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1971), 145. Cf. Eliot’s confession to Mary Trevelyan in 1953, as recorded by her: “I believe in hell, yes, I do. I live in constant fear of it myself. . . . I don’t believe this is common – perhaps I am abnormal” (Lyndall Gordon, *T. S. Eliot*, 468).

³⁹ Miłosz, *The Year of the Hunter*, 220.

⁴⁰ E.g. Magdalena Kay, *In Gratitude for All the Gifts: Seamus Heaney and Eastern Europe*

(Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2012), 83: “Eliot is the English-language modernist most important to the young Miłosz.”

⁴¹ Miłosz, *Witness of Poetry*, 14–15, 34; cf. Miłosz, *To Begin Where I Am*, 389; Jesse T. Airodi, “Eliot, Miłosz, and the Enduring Modernist Protest,” *Twentieth Century Literature* (Winter, 1988), 455.

⁴² Miłosz, *Witness of Poetry*, 34.

⁴³ Miłosz, “If Only It Could Be Said,” in *To Begin Where I Am: Selected Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 327. Later in *The Witness of Poetry* (p. 95) Miłosz softens his summary critique: “Clearly, any neat division of poetry into the ‘alienated’ and ‘non-alienated’ will encounter serious difficulties. I pretend to no precision here.”

⁴⁴ Czesław Miłosz *To Begin Where I Am*, 391.

⁴⁵ Miłosz, *Witness of Poetry*, 27. Cf. Miłosz, *A Year of the Hunter*, 111: “One can say about these [contemporary American] poets that their technique is first-rate but that they have nothing to write about. Their ‘life experience’ shows through every line of verse; it is the life of lecturers on university campuses or in high schools.”

⁴⁶ Czesław Miłosz, “Reflections on T.S. Eliot” (1965), in *To Begin Where I Am*, 398: “This is an almost unbelievable undertaking; he built out of impossibility, absence, ruins. If, however, he achieved his aim to some extent, it would mean that people in the twentieth century need not be too pessimistic about their own potency.”

⁴⁷ Czesław Miłosz, “Reflections on T.S. Eliot,” 391.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 397.

⁴⁹ Miłosz, *Witness of Poetry*, 27; Czesław Miłosz, Nobel Laureate Lecture, 8 December 1980, <http://nobelprize.org/literature/laureates/1980/milosz-lecture-en.html>.

⁵⁰ Czesław Miłosz, interviewed by Robert Faggen, “The Art of Poetry No. 70,” *Paris Review*, Winter 1994,

<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1721/czeslaw-milosz-the-art-of-poetry-no-70-czeslaw-milosz>, emphasis in original.

⁵¹ See e.g. Lyndall Gordon, *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* (New York: Norton, 1998).

⁵² Miłosz, *The Witness of Poetry*, 37.

⁵³ I think it is correct to say that Miłosz corrected Eliot’s 1919 essay because Eliot himself modified his slurs against romanticism in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*. There he praised Wordsworth for striving “to imitate. . . the very language of men,” and for the “purposes and social passions which animated” Wordsworth’s greatest poetry. *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry In England*

(Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1933), 62, 64.

⁵⁴ T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Writings* (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 185.

⁵⁵ Czesław Miłosz, "The Rebirth of Utopia: Herbert Marcuse," in Czesław Miłosz, *Visions from San Francisco Bay* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1982), 185.

⁵⁶ Miłosz, Nobel Lecture.

⁵⁷ T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," iii; quoted in Scott, "The Social Critic and His Discontents," 70.

⁵⁸ Miłosz, "In Warsaw," *New and Collected Poems*, 76.

⁵⁹ Lydia Dittler Schulman, *Paradise Lost and the Rise of the American Republic* (Boston: Northeastern Univ. Press, 1992). Cf. Armand Himy, "Paradise Lost as a republican 'tractatus theologico-politicus,'" in *Milton and Republicanism*, ed. David Armitage, Armand Himy, and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), 118 f.

⁶⁰ Peter Dale Scott, "Czesław Miłosz and Solidarity; or, Poetry and the Liberation of a People," *Brick* 78 (Winter 2006), 67–74. An extract from a poem by Miłosz, "You Who Wronged," is inscribed on the Solidarity monument in Gdańsk.

⁶¹ Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind: In Greek Philosophy and Literature* trans. by T. G. Rosenmeyer (New York: Dover, 1982).

⁶² Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind*, 281, 301.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 299.

BOOKS

Poland in the Irish Nationalist Imagination, 1772–1922: Anti-Colonialism within Europe, by Róisín Healy. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017. viii + 321 pages. Index, bibliography. ISBN 978-3-319-43430-8. Hardcover. \$79.96 on Amazon.

A scholarly survey of Irish attitudes toward Polish struggles for independence since the partitions in the eighteenth century. It is clear that the author's knowledge of Polish affairs is limited; she is primarily an expert on Ireland. However, she judiciously uses the information she possesses and does not overgeneralize on the basis of limited knowledge.

Healy begins with analyzing attitudes toward the Polish cause in nineteenth-century Europe. She rightly points out that the majority of Polish emigres lived in France rather than Ireland.

However, the Irish perceived many similarities between their own situation in the British Empire and the numerous Polish risings that were met with sympathy (tea and sympathy, one would like to add) in Western Europe. She pays strong attention to the November 1830 Rising in Poland and compares it to the Young Ireland movement. The January 1863 Rising and its disastrous consequences for Polish social and cultural life are then juxtaposed with the Home Rule Bills and Minorities Policy in the British Empire up to the First World War. The book concludes with the achievement of statehood in both Poland and Ireland.

While there is little to disagree with in the book, two issues require clarification. Professor Healy sees the Russian Empire as somewhat similar to the British. While all empires share certain features, the differences here are significant. I subscribe to the view that the Russian Empire's political and social culture substantially derives from that of the Mongols rather than being European in origin. Hence for a country like Poland—as well as Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Georgia—Russian bondage was both alien and immeasurably destructive. Most Western Europeans remain blind to the deep non-European roots of Russia's culture and/or consider them a nonproblem. After all, anthropologically speaking, Russians look pretty much like their European neighbors to the west. This misleading biological similarity hides deep psychological differences. The second issue concerns the minorities of whom prepartitioned Poland had a good number. It does not take much political savvy to realize that during the partitions of Poland, the occupying powers (Russia, Prussia, and Austria) did everything they could to turn the minorities against the majority Polish population, and vice versa. Catherine the Great issued an order about the Pale of Settlement that expelled Jews from the properly Russian parts of the Empire into Polish territory. One can imagine how the high density of the Jewish population and competition for jobs influenced Polish-Jewish relations. Austria did its best to cultivate the attitude of alienation from the Poles in Ruthenian peasantry: it is largely to Austrians that Ukrainians owe their