

**Extracts concerning Eliot from my MS book, Ecstatic Pessimist:
Czeslaw Milosz -- Poet of Catastrophe and Hope**

[ABBREVIATIONS

- ABC Czeslaw Milosz. *Milosz's ABC's*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001.
- HPL Czeslaw Milosz. *The History of Polish Literature*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.
- LU Czeslaw Milosz. *The Land of Ulro*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1984.
- NCP Czeslaw Milosz. *New and Collected Poems: 1931-2001*. New York: Ecco Press/ HarperCollins, 2003.
- NR Czeslaw Milosz. *Native Realm: A Search for Self-Definition*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968.
- SS Czeslaw Milosz. *Second Space: New Poems*. New York: Ecco, 2004.
- TP Czeslaw Milosz. *A Treatise on Poetry*. New York: Ecco Press/ HarperCollins, 2001.
- Visions Czeslaw Milosz. *Visions from San Francisco*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975.
- WP Czeslaw Milosz. *The Witness of Poetry*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1983.]

1) Overall Perspective

p. 11: Milosz, who translated *The Waste Land* while Warsaw was being destroyed around him, had first admired Eliot for his “oppositional stance” in an age of alienation and decay.¹ But by the time I knew him he was distinguishing himself from Eliot’s focus on a lost past and “renouncing the world for the sake of ‘the still point’ outside time” (TP, 123).²

2) Eliot, “Gerontion,” and Milosz, “Farewell,” (1945)

pp. 138-

Along with “Songs of Adrian Zielinski,” “Farewell” in *Ocalenie* immediately follows the *persona* poems of *Voices of Poor People*. It is not itemized among them, however. Instead, somewhat like Eliot’s *Gerontion*, the *persona* is a tragic transitional figure of stature rather than a “poor” one, lamenting his doomed culture -- that of the doomed Second Polish Republic. Like Moses on Mount Nebo, he sees a future he cannot enter, and says “Farewell” to those who are moving on. The poem is one of great dignity and authority; and, for the first time in the book, makes references to salvation, and a saving power that is not for the speaker.³

The speaker is in Verona, a screen for Warsaw. The city now “is no more,” gone with the nationalism for which it suffered:

¹ Czesław Milosz, “Reflections on T.S. Eliot,” in Czesław Milosz, *To Begin Where I Am*, 391. Originally published in *Kultura* (Paris), March 1965.

² Cf. WP, 34: “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.”

³ In “A Poor Christian,” for example, the speaker talks of “Waiting two thousand years for the second coming of Jesus;” but he expects only to be counted “among the helpers of death,”

Verona is no more.
 I crumbled its brickdust in my fingers. That is what remains
 Of the great love of native cities. (NCP, 72)⁴

But the loss is not total:

I hear your laughter in the garden. And the mad spring's
 scent comes toward me across the wet leaves.
 Toward me, who, not believing in any saving power
(*zbawczą moc*),
 outlived the others and myself as well.

A discrepancy has emerged in the gloom. The “mad spring”
 disturbs the old man, even more than “depraved May” disturbed
 Eliot's Gerontion.

Children's laughter in the garden. A first clear star
 above a foam of buds on the hills
 and a light song returns to my lips
 and I am young again, as before, in Verona.

But this jolt from his past energizes him only to reject it. “A nightingale
 is singing,” but its song is as alien to the speaker as the mermaids were
 to Prufrock:

To reject. To reject everything. That is not it.
 It will neither resurrect the past nor return me to it.
 Sleep, Romeo, Juliet, on your headrest of stone feathers.
 I won't raise your bound hands from the ashes.
 Let the cat visit the deserted cathedrals,
 its pupil flashing on the altars. Let an owl
 nest on the dead ogive.....

⁴ Warsaw is said to have been 96 percent destroyed by the Nazis, in revenge for the 1944 Uprising. The Party seriously considered, but rejected, a proposal to simply rebuild a new city elsewhere. Much of Warsaw was still not rebuilt when I was there in 1959-61.

I won't return. I want to know what's left
after rejecting youth and spring.... (NCP. 72).⁵

The oxymoron "stone feathers" recalls the oxymoron "feather of lead" spoken by Romeo after learning that his cousin, Benvolio, has fought with the Capulets. ... Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health...." (*Romeo and Juliet*, I.i.173). Romeo's oxymoron reflects his ambivalence about the love and violence of Verona; Milosz's old man's reflects his ambivalence about a lost era.

At the end of the poem the persona returns to the question of salvation, alluding again to Eden in the manner of "Flight":

From life, from the apple cut by the flaming knife,
what grain will be saved (*Jakie ocali się ziarno*)?⁶

only to close the door on such hopes for himself:

My son, believe me, nothing remains.
Only adult toil,
the furrow of fate in the palm.
Only toil,
Nothing more.⁷

The poem, in Milosz's words, "contains both despair and an acceptance of the new world."⁸

⁵ "That is not it" (*To nie to*), exclaims the speaker, echoing Prufrock's "That is not it, at all." The echo of Eliot is strengthened a few lines later: "children's laughter in the garden." Cf. *Burnt Norton*: "Go, said the bird, for the leaves were full of children,/ Hidden excitedly, containing laughter;" *East Coker*, "The laughter in the garden."

⁶ The Polish word *ziarno* (grain or seed) will play an important metaphorical role, as a kernel of the future, in Milosz's major poems "A Treatise on Morals" (1947) and "A Treatise on Poetry" (1957). See Chapters 9, 12.

⁷ This last two lines – *Tylko trud/ nie więcej* ("only toil, nothing more") echo in Polish, perhaps accidentally, a bitter joke I heard very frequently in Warsaw in 1959-61: "In Moscow, there used to be two newspapers, *Prawda* [Truth] and *Trud* [Labor]. Now there is only *Trud*."

⁸ Czarnecka and Fiut, *Conversations*, 139.

3) Milosz's "polemic with the T.S. Eliot of *The Four Quartets*" (TP, 123n) in *A Treatise on Poetry* (1950, 1956)

pp. 255-58:

There is much with which to reproach us.
 Given the choice, we rejected peaceful silence
 And long meditation on the structure of the world
 Which deserves respect. Neither the eternal moment
 Attracted us as it should, nor purity of style.
 We wanted, instead, to move as words move,
 Raising the dust of names and of events. (NCP, 149; TP, 58).

As Milosz comments,

This passage repeats... the basic dilemma that confronts the narrator throughout the poem: poetry as contemplation of being (*bytu*) or poetry as participation in movement (*ruchu*), that is, in history, and thus a poetry of commitments? The first choice seems more in harmony with the vocation of the poet; the second involves a departure from the rules of a perfected art in the name of moral (?) passion. (TP, 121n)⁹

But the next note, on "the eternal moment," lifts us to a less divided perspective:

The eternal moment is the opposite of time. It is, if only for a second, outside the flow of time. T. S. Eliot in *The Four Quartets* speaks of "the still point of the turning world." This

⁹ The self-questioning "(?)" occurs only in the English translation, not the original Polish (*moralnego*, W 2:246).

idea often appears in the writings of mystics from various civilizations. (TP, 121n)¹⁰

The remainder of the poem proceeds on the two levels. It both narrates the “subjective grit” of Milosz’s decision to return to Europe without Janka, and also continues an objective “polemic with the T.S. Eliot of *The Four Quartets*” (TP, 123n).

Between these two levels, the back and forth of the dialectic of the poem continues. He first returns to his desperate confusion at that time, while placing it in perspective:

Many a man will concede, if he knows himself,
That he was like one who hears a chorus
Of voices and doesn't know what they mean.
Thence, fury. A foot to the accelerator, as if
Speed could save us from voices and phantoms.
(NCP, 149; TP, 59)

But at the same time he defends himself from the charge of conservative accusers from the right:

And yet the accusers were mistaken, if,
Shedding tears over the evils of this age,
They saw us as angels, hurled into an abyss,
Shaking our fists at the works of God.
There is no doubt that many perished, infamously,

¹⁰ “The eternal moment” in the note (*moment wieczny*, which I would have translated as “An eternal moment”) is not a translation but a late rewrite (1996) of the poem’s original Polish (1956): “*temat wieczny*” (“eternal theme”). Few words could be more antithetical in meaning than “theme” and “moment.” But to catch the oxymoronic intersection of time and the timeless, “eternal moment” is probably an improvement, as well as a helpful allusion to the “*moment wieczny*” in the Leman Notebook. The Polish note, also from the 1990s, glosses “*temat*” as “*moment*” (W 2:246n). But the word “moment,” which occurs four times in eight pages in the English text of the poem itself (TP, 52-59), does not occur once in the Polish text, where four different words are used (*chwili, sekundzie, temat, wszędzie*, W 2:239-47). I suspect that Milosz’s decision in 1996 to comment on *temat wieczny* (the “eternal theme”) as *moment wieczny* (“the eternal moment”) was influenced by the English publication in 1990 of his friend Aleksander Fiut’s major critical book, *Moment Wieczny*, as *The Eternal Moment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

Because, like an illiterate discovering chemistry,
 They suddenly discovered relativity and time.
 For others the very roundness of a stone
 Picked up on the bank of a river provided
 The lesson. Or the bleeding gills of a perch,
 Or -- the moon rising over banks of clouds --
 A beaver ploughing the slumbering softness of water
 (NCP, 149-50; TP, 59)¹¹

(The chorus of the despondent first passage, and the rising moon of the hopeful second, will be reunited in the transcendent line from Horace --

Jam Cytherea chorus ducit Venus imminente luna [Already Cytherean Venus leads choruses under the rising moon, NCP, 151; TP 61] --

that concludes the poem.)

The Hegelian effort to reconcile opposites is now addressed, in a rebuke to Eliot on the one hand, and the pre-war Cracovian poets of Young Poland in Part One on the other:

For contemplation fades without resistance.
 For its own sake, it should be forbidden.
 And we, certainly, were happier than those
 Who drank sadness from the books of Schopenhauer,
 While they listened from their garrets to the din
 Of music from the tavern down below.

¹¹ In a note, Milosz clarifies: "Who are the accused? Who are the accusers? Roughly speaking, the first are all those who have chosen movement, *devenir* or becoming, and accept therefore the flux of things, including the idea of truth. These are the disciples of Marx, Nietzsche, Dewey, etc. The narrator, despite his reservations about Marxism, belongs to this group. There are, however, people attached to a conservative vision of immutable essences. For them the partisans of flux and universal movement undermine, with their materialism and determinism, a divine order. This division into two camps has political implications. The peculiar situation of the author, who was not himself a Communist, who was in the employ of a Communist government, exposed him to attacks from the political right. They are, perhaps, the accusers" (TP, 122n).

(NCP, 150; TP, 59-60; cf. TP, 7)

Commenting on the line, “There is no doubt that many perished infamously,” Milosz identifies them as those who

read the subverters of traditional values, Nietzsche and Marx, and are tempted by the nihilist denial of Being, which to medieval thinkers was another name for God. *The narrator advises against such an extreme; he wants to retain both ends of the contradiction.* According to him, the observation of tangible things (the roundness of a stone, the gills of a perch, a beaver) restores our reverence for the fundamental quality of the world, which is *esse*, "to be." Contemplation of that quality is a basic attribute, and the privilege, of poetry. Thus the narrator speaks here as a poet; he defends his craft against the encroachment of social and political duties. (TP, 122-23n, emphasis added)

Here Milosz shows once again the influence of Brzozowski, who, in his “Marxist-Catholic” reading of Hegel, “wanted to embrace everything, to place everything in a balance of opposites.”¹²

In the same spirit – of “a balance of opposites” – Milosz then expands on the poetic passage:

For contemplation fades without resistance: This line is directed against purity in poetry, but it is also a polemic with the T. S. Eliot of *The Four Quartets*. By renouncing the world for the sake of "the still point," of perfect stillness outside time, we may deprive contemplation of its intensity.
(TP, 123n)

¹² Milosz, *Emperor of the Earth*, 228.

(I detect a similarity between the views Milosz ascribed here to Eliot, and the “Aesthetic Ketman” which in *The Captive Mind* he had described to Polish intellectual escapism -- by “plunging into the past and ... converse with works of great aesthetic value.”¹³ This attack on quiescence is in fact an attack on his own Ketman -- as he later described it in *Native Realm*¹⁴ -- while serving the Polish government. And it summarizes his resolve not to return to the life of dissemblance he had been practicing.)

All Milosz’s arguments in “Natura” have reinforced him in his decision to engage in history rather than live on an American farm. The earlier anguish of the decision has been momentarily eclipsed by the joyous conclusion to the October Ode. The decision he has made celebrates, at the end of the poem, liberation from his earlier duplicitous, historically constrained form of life:

At least poetry, philosophy, action were not,
For us, separated, as they were for them, [Young Poland]
But joined in one will: we needed to be of use.
And that is the -- sometimes burdensome -- recompense.
(NCP, 150; TP, 59-60)¹⁵

Poetry and action “were not separated.” As Milosz comments,

This is a bold statement, yet it is justified to some extent by the very fact of writing a work like *Treatise on Poetry*. It is, after all, a poem of commitment, both to a vision of what poetry should be and to a non-totalitarian model of society.
(TP, 124n)

¹³ Czeslaw Milosz, *The Captive Mind* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 68.

¹⁴ NR, 269. See Chapter 9.

¹⁵ In making this difficult decision “to be of use,” rather than write poetry on a farm, Milosz may have been influenced by the example of his model Mickiewicz, who in 1848 “went to Italy and organized a Polish legion there to fight for the liberation of the northern Italians from Austria” (HPL, 230).