

Chapter & Verse

James Knox Whittet

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CZESLAW MILOSZ (1911 - 2004) THE OTHER SIDE

At Hawthornden Castle in Scotland, each study/bedroom is named after a famous writer: Johnson, Brontë, Yeats and so on. The name on my door was Milosz.

Czeslaw Milosz was born in what was historically a region of Lithuania but in that part of Europe, national boundaries were constantly subject to change through wars and treaties. At the poet's birth, the region belonged to Poland and Polish was the official language and it was the language in which he wrote. Nonetheless, Milosz had a deep love for the language he only partly learned as an infant. In middle age, he hired a tutor to teach him the Lithuanian tongue 'in case it turned out to be the language spoken in heaven'. You might say that Milosz had long suffered a homesickness for his native tongue and he expresses this in the following poem called *Faithful Mother Tongue*:

It was not only his native language that he turned to in later life but his native religion. Brought up as part of the Soviet Union, as a

*Faithful mother tongue,
I have been serving you.
Every night, I used to set
before you little bowls of
colours
so you could have your birch,
your cricket, your finch
as preserved in my memory.*

*This lasted many years.
You were my native land; I
lacked any other.
I believed that you would also
be a messenger
between me and some good
people
even if they were few, twenty,
ten
or not born, as yet.*

young man he embraced the belief in science, philosophical materialism and the denial of any spiritual dimension to life but as he grew older, he returned to the Catholicism of his rural childhood. He came to concur with the famous statement by Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus*: 'We feel that even if all possible scientific questions be answered, the

problems of life have not been touched at all'.

1951, while serving in Paris as an official for the Republic of Poland, he defected from the Soviet block and obtained political asylum in France, later moving to the USA where he taught Polish Literature in the University of California. His experiences of living under the barbaric governments of Stalin and Hitler lay behind his celebrated novel, *The Captive Mind* which is a disturbing exploration of the way in which intellectuals can rationally justify any attack on human freedom. One only needs to recall those British intellectuals of the 1930's who sought to excuse the atrocities of Stalin whose actions were explained as being necessary to prepare the way for a future Utopia. It's often the less sophisticated minds who act against injustice out of a sense of moral outrage.



Through his long life through troubled times in a troubled century, some of Milosz's loveliest and most moving poems celebrate his delight in everyday activities, what he calls the *charms of the ordinariness* as in the poem, *By the Peonies*, in memory of his mother.

In 1980, Milosz was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. He spent the last years of his life in the beautiful Polish city of Krakow and he died there in 2004 and was buried in one of the city's Roman Catholic churches. During the communist years, his works had been banned in Poland.

In perhaps his most memorable poem, he writes that even if it turns out that there is no God, no afterlife and no meaning, there will be still be a human voice crying out in protest for all eternity.

from **By The Peonies**

The peonies bloom, white and pink.
And inside each, as in a fragrant bowl,
A swarm of tiny beetles have their conversation,
For the flower is given to them as their home.

Mother stands by the peony bed,
Reaches for one bloom, opens its petals,
And looks for a long time into peony lands,
Where one short instant equals a whole year.



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Meaning

When I die, I will see the lining of the world.
The other side, beyond bird, mountain, sunset.
The true meaning, ready to be decoded.
What never added up will add Up,
What was incomprehensible will be comprehended.
- And if there is no lining to the world?
If a thrush on a branch is not a sign,
But just a thrush on the branch? If night and day
Make no sense following each other?
And on this earth there is nothing except this earth?
- Even if that is so, there will remain
A word wakened by lips that perish,
A tireless messenger who runs and runs
Through interstellar fields, through the revolving
galaxies,
And calls out, protests, screams.

MILOSZ QUOTE

“The purpose of poetry is to
remind us
how difficult it is to remain just
one person,
for our house is open, there are
no keys in the doors,
and invisible guests come in and
out at will.”