

Medical scientists relying upon population statistics have established that the most remarkable instances of longevity are found hidden in remote mountains, among individuals who lead uneventful, monotonous and boring lives. The poet Czeslaw Milosz, who died at the age of ninety-three, still creative to the end, after a dramatic existence that had thrown him into the very heart of some of the most dreadful episodes of the twentieth century, seems to have followed quite the opposite recipe – but then, poets are hardly material for statistics.

Born in 1911, in a small town of Tsarist Russia (all his life, by the way, like many other Polish intellectuals – see Conrad! – he was to observe the Russian enigma with deep insight and horrified fascination), he was the scion of an aristocratic family, half-Polish and half-Lithuanian. In early childhood, he shared the nomadic life of his father, a civil engineer who was sent to various corners of Siberia in charge of the construction of government buildings, and thus he witnessed some of

the fighting of the Bolshevik revolution. These early experiences provided a fitting prelude to the turmoils of his later life.

Milosz spent his youth and student years in Wilno, a baroque and cosmopolitan city where the main spoken languages were Polish and Yiddish, with also a smattering of Lithuanian, Byelorussian and Russian. In the 1930s, he went to live in Paris, where he perfected his excellent knowledge of French language and literature and enjoyed the guidance and affection of a distant relative who became his spiritual mentor, O.V. de L. Milosz (1877–1939), a former Lithuanian diplomat who had become a much admired French poet. The elder Milosz gave the younger decisive encouragement to follow his poetic calling.

Back in Poland, on the eve of war, Milosz worked for the national radio. In 1939, from the beginning of the German invasion, he took an active part in the underground resistance to the Nazis. German occupation was particularly savage in Poland; as Milosz himself observed later, 'Horror is the law of living creatures, and civilisation is concerned with masking that truth ... The habits of civilisation have a certain enduring quality, and the Germans in occupied Western Europe were obviously embarrassed and

concealed their aims, while in Poland they acted completely openly.'

This confrontation with naked horror was to leave an indelible imprint upon his own vision of reality. The everyday order of our lives may seem to us natural and permanent, but it is in fact as fragile and illusory as the cardboard props on a theatrical stage. It can collapse in a flash and turn at once into black chaos. Our condition is precarious; even basic human decency can shatter and vanish in an instant: 'The nearness of death destroys shame. Men and women change as soon as they know that the date of their execution has been fixed by a fat little man with shiny boots and a riding crop. They copulate in public, on a small bit of ground surrounded by barbed wire – their last home on Earth.'

After the war, like many Polish intellectuals who hoped that, by collaborating with the Communist regime, they might help it to reform itself, Milosz became a diplomat and was sent as cultural attaché, first to Washington and then to Paris. He understood

1 Milosz, *Milosz's ABCs*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, 2001, 'Anus mundi,' pp. 39–40.

2 Milosz, *The Captive Mind*. Secker & Warburg, London, 1953, p. 28.

very quickly that serving a Stalinist regime would entail not only morally and intellectually unacceptable compromise, but more simply would provoke downright revulsion: 'A man may persuade himself by the most logical reasoning that he will greatly benefit his health by swallowing live frogs; and thus rationally convinced, he may swallow a first frog, then a second, but at the third his stomach will revolt.'³

In 1951, he abandoned his posting, broke with the regime, and made a jump without return into 'the abyss of exile,' 'the worst of all misfortunes, for it meant sterility and inaction.' Unlike most exiled writers, however, he stuck with his mother language, his most precious belonging. With the exception of his private correspondence (in French and in English), he continued, until death, to do nearly all his writing in Polish.

The first ten years of his exile were spent in France. This was a period of extreme hardship, isolation and despair. The insecurity of his material conditions – to support his young family he had nothing but the precarious earnings from his pen – was further compounded by political ostracism from Parisian intellectual circles, whose cowardice and stupidity he was never to forget nor forgive. At first, and as long as he was carrying

3 *ibid.*, pp. xii–xiii.

the prestigious title of an official representative of 'Democratic Poland,' the French 'progressive' intelligentsia (under the pontificate of Sartre–Beauvoir), had warmly welcomed him; but as soon as it became known that he had defected, he was treated as a leper. Even at his publisher's office (Gallimard – the most prestigious and influential publisher in Paris), one editor took the thoughtful initiative of submitting his manuscripts to receive the *imprimatur* of a censor from the Polish embassy!

In 1953, he made his situation even worse by publishing what was to become his most influential work, *The Captive Mind*, written 'not for a Western audience, but against it' – against its obtuse and wilful blindness; the purpose was indeed to remind his readers that 'if something exists in one place, it will exist everywhere.'⁴ Yet, with their appalling lack of imagination, 'the inhabitants of Western countries little realise that millions of their fellow men who seem superficially more or less similar to them live in a world as fantastic as that of the men from Mars.' Let us not forget: 'Man is so plastic a being that one can even conceive of the day when a thoroughly self-respecting citizen can crawl about on all fours, sporting a tail of brightly

4 *ibid.*, p. 29.

coloured feathers as a sign of conformity to the order he lives in.⁵ At the very moment when the intellectual and literary world was shunning him as if he had the plague, one man, a man of courage and integrity, extended to him a brotherly hand and helped him survive: Albert Camus. Soon, a deep friendship developed between the two writers – a friendship that was further strengthened by their shared admiration for Simone Weil.

Regarding Camus, one cannot fully understand his intellectual and spiritual development during the last part of his life – from the end of the war till his premature death in 1960 – without taking into account the exceptional importance of the influence on him of Simone Weil's thought and the example of her life. It is a point which even his best biographers have not fully grasped, thus confirming Emerson's opinion that literary biography is a vain and futile exercise, since it attempts to describe lives, the most significant events of which, by very definition, took place in a realm of silence and invisibility.⁶

⁵ *ibid.* p. 29.

⁶ 'Geniuses have the shortest biographies because their inner lives are led out of sight and earshot; and in the end their cousins can tell you nothing about them.'

As early as 1948, Camus undertook to publish, in a series ('L'Espoir') of which he was the director at Gallimard, two of the main works of Simone Weil on social and political issues, *L'Enracinement* and *La Condition ouvrière* (by the way, these two books were the most successful of the entire series). Together with Gustave Thibon (who undertook at the same time to edit a selection of Weil's philosophical and religious writings), he thus became one of the earliest and most devoted guardians of her memory. More importantly, her writings became a constant source of inspiration for his own thinking, as is attested in many passages from his notebooks and was confirmed publicly on the occasion of his Nobel Prize in 1957: at a press conference in Stockholm, shortly before the ceremony, on being asked which living writers were most important to him, he named several friends, Algerian and French, then added, 'And also Simone Weil – sometimes the dead are closer to us than the living.'

Some ten years earlier, as he was editing Simone Weil's writings for publication, he made contact with her parents, who gave him a warm welcome, especially her mother, Mme Bernard Weil, who was herself a most remarkable person. Milosz came to know her too, and after Camus' death – which deeply affected Mme

Weil – he continued to visit her.⁷ At the end of his essay on Weil, Milosz records a touching and revealing anecdote: the day Camus learned that he had been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, as he was being chased by a pack of journalists and photographers, he ran for shelter at Mme Weil's apartment. We know that for Camus, who was wracked by self-doubt, this crushing honour was in many respects an ordeal: far from it giving him self-confidence, he was staggered and overwhelmed by it. Just as a religious believer, when hit by a stunning shock, spontaneously enters a church for a moment of silent contemplation, Camus experienced the need to meditate quietly, alone, in the old room where young Simone thought and wrote.

In 1960, Milosz settled in the United States, where the University of California, Berkeley, offered him the chair of Slavic languages and literature. His academic activities did not interrupt the pursuit of his own literary work – more than forty volumes of poetry and essays, crowned by various prizes, including eventually, in 1980, the Nobel itself. After the collapse of communism

7 Milosz mentions this in a letter to his American friend the Trappist monk and writer Thomas Merton. See *Striving towards Being: the Letters of Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, 1997, p. 68.

and till his death in 2004, he shared his time between Berkeley and Cracow. After having been away for more than half a century, he must have found his native country more foreign than the foreign lands where he had spent the greater part of his life and where he produced the best of his creative work – itself a fruit of exile.

For Milosz, as for Camus, the discovery of Simone Weil's writings gave a new orientation to his spiritual life.⁸ One finds traces of this revelation all through his essays, his correspondence and even his teaching at the university (he gave a course on Manichaeism, directly inspired by Weil's views on the subject, and edited in Polish a thick volume of her selected essays).

8 The religious problem occupied a significant place in the friendship between Camus and Milosz. Camus was an atheist who doubted his own atheism, and Milosz was a Christian who doubted his own Christianity. Doubt was a common concern of both; the mystical certainty of Simone Weil was for them a guiding light in the mist. (Of course, I am grossly simplifying here a very complex issue.)

On discovering Simone Weil at a time of harsh isolation and deep disarray – when writing *The Captive Mind* – see his first letter to Thomas Merton (op. cit., p. 8): 'I went to much despair. I was helped in my despair by things and some human beings – among others, by Simone Weil, through her writings. I felt afterwards she could help not only me and succeeded in publishing her *Chosen Writings* in my Polish translation – a book of 350 pages ...'

The religious position of Milosz appears both symmetrical with and opposite to that of Simone Weil. Her remark on the pagans who are naturally Christian, and the Christians who are naturally pagan, could fairly well summarise their respective situations. Simone Weil had a great desire to join the Church, in order to be allowed to partake in the sacraments; she denied herself this blessed privilege: she deliberately did not cross the threshold and remained outside – in solidarity with, and out of compassion for, the wretched condition of the neo-pagans. Milosz, conversely, born and educated within the Church, often wished to leave it; he wished to escape both the Polish Church of his childhood – political and chauvinistic – and the dismal caricature of Protestantism into which he saw that Western post-conciliar Catholicism was hopelessly drifting.⁹

9 Partaking in the sacraments was a problem for him, but he took his children to Sunday Mass – thus repeating in a certain way the dilemma of Camus: 'I remember one conversation with Camus. He asked me if, in my opinion, it was appropriate that he, an atheist, should send his children to first communion. This conversation took place shortly after my visit with Karl Jaspers in Basel, whom I had asked about raising my children as Catholics. Jaspers had responded that as a Protestant he was not favourably inclined towards Catholicism, but that

Milosz once defined himself as an 'ecstatic pessimist' and it is perhaps in this that he most resembles Simone Weil. In front of the mystery of evil, there is not much room in their faith for a Providence (that would comfort suffering), nor for a Communion of the Saints (that would endow suffering with meaning).

Is a consoling religion a debased form of religion? 'Love is not a consolation, it is a light' – this sentence of Simone Weil is admirable; but why should light not be consoling? At least, this is how the humble souls perceive it, when they piously light candles in front of the holy images of the Virgin Mary, or of some saints. Yet, of course, we can hardly imagine our philosopher – with her implacable genius – ever indulging in such practices (which, however, Pascal himself did not despise).¹⁰

children must be raised in their own faith, if only to give them access to the biblical tradition, and that later they could make their own choice. I responded to Camus's question in more or less the same vein.' *Milosz's ABCs*, pp. 77–78.

10 Pascal, *Pensées*. Kaplan edition: pensée 115, Lafuma ed.: pensée 418.

