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CZESLAW MILOSZ AND THE WITNESS OF THE NAKED POET

John Pustejovsky

Czeslaw Milosz was celebrated as many things during his long life. Born in 1911 into a fading, Polish-speaking gentry in Russian-ruled Lithuania, he was witness to the tumult of the 1930's in Europe, the Second World War, the Warsaw Uprising, the imposition of Stalinist communism on Central Europe, and an emigrant to America, writing in Polish for all his ninety-plus years. Milosz, gifted with the senses of a naturalist, watched as war, hunger, repression, terror and materialist culture dismantled inherited measures of civilized life. His works brought him celebrity as a harsh critic of communism, a hero of Polish culture, a faithful, lifelong Roman Catholic. Such characterizations troubled him. He had lived amidst the conflict of his European heritage and twentieth-century ideologies in East and West, but nonetheless believed he had tried to give witness to something larger, more urgent than these world events.

In 1958 American monk Thomas Merton wrote an unsolicited letter to Milosz, then forty-seven years old and living in Paris. Merton had just finished reading *The Captive Mind* (published in 1953), a book in which Milosz described the intense pressures facing intellectuals and artists living under the increasing Stalinism of the Polish state, and the psychic and spiritual contortions to which some of them submitted in order to survive. "Your book," wrote Merton, "has come to me" as something I can frankly call 'spiritual,' that is to say as the inspiration of much thought, meditation and prayer about my own obligations

to the rest of the human race, and about the predicament of us all." (Faggen 3-4) Milosz was very pleased. In the decades since, many others have also found in him the sensibility glimpsed by Merton. For Milosz's poetry reveals an intense self-knowledge, an exuberant spiritual vitality, and an awareness of a freedom won not so much by escaping the chaos of the century as by abandoning its promises. As his catholic sensibility toward human life and the world found its way into speech, his highly independent imagination grasped the dignity, beauty, love, and death of individual human life. He created poetry that foregoes abstraction and self-referentiality, rooted instead in ordinary speech and everyday experience. Awed by what he called "society established in the soul of the individual," (Faggen 102) he discovered human solidarities that transcend the world's violence, and testified to the power of language to recover this as lived presence. Writing in 2004, Seamus Heaney said, "one of the great delights of his work is a ... sensation of invigilating reality from a head-clearing perspective ... and at the same time being given gratifyingly spiritual companionship." And it was precisely this role that Milosz was most concerned to have played. In a 2003 conversation with another monk, he raised this question directly, and repeatedly, revealing that "... at the end of his life he doubted the spiritual value of his work. He anguished over this question." (Driscoll 45) It is this realm of experience, and the dynamic it lent his poetry, that was his greatest concern.

What follows is not intended to characterize Milosz's spirituality, only to suggest how experiences created in his poems have brought me to find the "spiritual companionship" Milosz offers. I will look at a few poems of Milosz's old age to see how these create the intersubjective space essential to spiritual conversation, attending to two points in particular: the presentation of experience and the "presence effects" it produces, and the naked candor of his poetic voice. It is his way of presenting himself in the poems, his way of naming, and the unblinking witness he offers to his own experience—to moments of goodness and beauty, but also suffering, pettiness, and contradiction—that reveal something generous, open, courageous, and gracious about Milosz as a spiritual companion.

By his own admission Milosz did not consider himself capable of openness with another; in an early letter to Merton he wrote: "You are for me important, I feel in you a friend with whom I can be completely frank. The trouble is I have never been used to frankness. ... But I

hope, I feel, I met in you somebody who will help me one day—this is a hope of a deeper contact and of complete openness on my part.” (Faggen 44) For many years he felt embarrassed to identify himself as a poet (*Road-side Dog* 15). This makes the candor and emotional intensity of many of his poems the more striking. “A Meadow” appears in *Facing the River*, published in 1993, in the years following Milosz’s visit to his homeland for the first time in more than fifty years. It belongs among those later poems written, as Robert Hass points out, “fifty or sixty years after the fact,” and which “return to that early world of wonder.” (Hass 2012: 181)

It was a riverside meadow, lush from before the hay harvest,
 On an immaculate day in the sun of June.
 I searched for it, found it, recognized it.
 Grasses and flowers grew there familiar in my childhood,
 With half-closed eyelids I absorbed luminescence.
 And the scent garnered me, all knowing ceased.
 Suddenly I felt I was disappearing and weeping with joy.

(*New and Collected Poems* 597)

Memory is a continuous current in Milosz’s poetry, but one can be startled by the way it occurs here. A place once familiar is found again, becomes present again. The poem begins with multiple namings: a *riverside meadow, lush, from before the hay harvest*. Calendar time, topography, the cycles of farming: aware of local seasons of growth and harvest, the poet takes all three of these as coordinates: the place, the time, the quality of light (on an immaculate day in the sun of June,) The latter is hardly a weatherman’s term, or a farmer’s. It is his alone, an instantaneous, easy judgment. This is a compact frame of reference, and it is unique to him. A few bare verbs establish the identity of the place for him: I searched for it, found it, recognized it. These dimensions of reference become more complex with the reference to childhood, and the cognitive acknowledgment of familiarity. And at the same time, the quality of the experience changes also—“I absorbed luminescence.” The sense of sight had helped to confirm that he had arrived in the place he sought, but now he is no longer watching, seeing, observing, but absorbing the medium of sight itself. The referents are no longer needed, or relevant. But if we describe what happening as “taking it in” we will be wide of the mark. “And the scent garnered me”—gathered

me, harvested me and carried me in. "All knowing ceased." That which affirms one as a human has ceased.

The experience begun with naming is now acting on him; no longer is this a matter of something *present to him*, but of the speaker within something larger, the speaker within a presence he has achieved by naming. The remaining sensation is joy, more joy than the vessel can hold.

What happens here? The speaker becomes present (once again) to the experience of this place, which he had first situated with respect to calendar time, topography and things of nature remembered, things still familiar from long before. At some point he is no longer the author of this experience; he has become present to it. Without acting out a self, he remains in a presence larger than himself, one experienced without a "seeing self," and without a vantage point. He remains aware of the intense sensation of joy.

Is this spiritual? There are no religious names, no obvious words of prayer, no epiphany (in the sense of a manifestation of the divine to sight). Yet the resonances carry at least as far as St. Paul's acknowledgment (2 Cor 5:6): "as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, We live by faith, not by sight." But the poem itself seems to make no effort at such a reminding. We are given to believe that the *naming* that is the poem leads to the coinciding, of now being present to himself as he had once before—with a certainty surpassing knowing and understanding. This is more than a memory, in any of that word's ordinary senses. With its simple telling of time, place, searching, recognizing—this poem leaves me shaken, because it is an experience of a quality of presence not encoded in religious language, not concealed in some internal space open only to the poet. It is in the open; it places things in the open by naming them. Hass notes, "These images from the later work are not the ones for which [Milosz] is best known." (Hass 2012: 181) But the account offered by the poem itself bears out the observation by Krzysztof Walczyk: Milosz returns again and again to the places, person and events secure in his memory, because he senses that he has not yet uncovered their truth (Walczyk 264).

"Blacksmith Shop" was published in 1991 in the volume *Provinces*.

I liked the bellows operated by rope.
 A hand or foot pedal—I don't remember which.
 But that blowing, and the blazing of the fire!
 And a piece of iron in the fire, held there by tongs,
 Red, softened for the anvil,
 Beaten with a hammer, bent into a horseshoe,
 Thrown in a bucket of water, sizzle, steam.
 And horses hitched to be shod,
 Tossing their manes; and in the grass by the river
 Plowshares, sledge runners, harrows waiting for repair.
 At the entrance, my bare feet on the dirt floor,
 Here, gusts of heat; at my back, white clouds.
 I stare and stare. It seems I was called for this:
 To glorify things just because they are. (NCP 503)

We don't know what evokes the admission, "I liked the bellows operated by rope," and the tacit admission that the mechanism that operates it is not interesting. But then there follows a rapid chain of sensations and sights. Nothing is static. We recognize a boy's attention drawn to fire. The bellows and the fire are essential to the smith, but the *blowing*, the *blazing* are specific to *his* watching and sensing; they name a reality of feeling and seeing brought about by his being there. The words lead the eyes: bellows, fire, iron; the work guides his attention. But it is not the blacksmith working that holds his attention, but the *making* happening before his eyes. The watcher is not in command—there are no action verbs applied to him. He is captivated by the sensory. But before this is realized, the watcher's eye turns, hungry for more, to what surrounds him and the smithy. Almost as an afterthought, the speaker situates himself concretely in space: "At the entrance, my bare feet on the dirt floor, / Here, gusts of heat; at my back, white clouds."

The cascading dynamic sensations stop; something unseen holds the watcher's gaze. The poet points inward. The drama of seeing and sensing doesn't hold his attention. Somewhere between the space made present by the naming and the instant of the next words there occurs the realization of calling—and its name: "to glorify things." "Calling" has happened, just as did making, occupying senses other than eyes and touch. Just as the poet is captivated by blazing and gusts of heat and by steam and becomes witness to the making of the horseshoe, from a cascade of naming in the smithy the writer has turned to

naming in the act of writing. We realize that in falling under the power of his incantation we have ourselves witnessed the poet's own making real of himself. This is the glory of his naming.

Once again, I ask myself, What just happened? Without conjuring from nothing, rather drawing them up from his own lived experience, Milosz has named and given a feeling of realness to things remembered. Returning to an experience once lived, he tests it and senses in it a reality that has named the purpose of his own being.

Milosz acknowledged repeatedly his faults in the practice of his Catholicism: "On Easter I went to confession, without profit, I feel: nothing to say, nothing to express. The Mass here in Newman Hall is a sort of gymnastics: get up, kneel, get up, sit down—like a military discipline. I impose upon myself that going to church (since 1953)." (Faggen 117) But even the two small poems considered above reveal qualities reflective of a robust spiritual nature. The poet's own growth in understanding comes not through considerations of religious practice or theological principles, but of his own life's experiences.

There is an acknowledgment of an Other in these poems, in the disclosure of visible and internal experiences. In many religions, the individual's self-disclosure (to a spiritual director or "soul friend") is fundamental to the search for God (Ruffing 2000: 118). Encouraging the voicing of the individual's longing, bringing to light a person's perspective on her own experience, its details, leads an attentive listener to insights on character and experience of the other. Janet Ruffing uses the qualities of everyday conversation laid out by Gadamer to characterize the exchange occurring in spiritual conversation: mutuality, a question-and-answer structure, a shared situation of unknowing, a non-adversarial climate, a specific subject matter of understanding (Ruffing 2011: 45 ff.) This willing self-disclosure is manifest in each of the poems. It was a need that Milosz acknowledged in an essay in *Visions from San Francisco Bay*: "But I, closed in by the boundaries of my own skin, destructible and conscious of my destructibility, am a speaking creature, that is, I need a Thou to address. I cannot speak to clouds and stones. Existing religions only partially satisfy that longing as human as speech, or do not satisfy it at all. (79-80) In the longer poem "An Appeal" Milosz directs explicit questions to the invisible reader/listener:

In the smoke of black tobacco, I make my way
 Toward you and I ask you a question.
 Tell me, for once at least laying
 Caution aside, and fear and guarded speech,
 Tell me, as you would in the middle of the night
 When we face only night, the ticking of a watch,
 The whistle of an express train, tell me
 Whether you really think that this world
 Is your home? That your internal planet
 That revolves, red-hot, propelled by the current
 Of your warm blood, is really in harmony
 With what surrounds you? (NCP 268)

The "situation of unknowing" and the specific subject of understanding also form a part of the situation, readily disclosed by the poet.

It is an obvious assumption that attention to all of an individual's experience offers a potential for spiritual growth—opening either gradually or suddenly in the context of ongoing spiritual conversation. There is in each of the two poems, however, another, subtler assumption essential to spiritual conversation; call it "integrity of the self." The complexity of his origins was suggested at the outset:

Milosz was, from the beginning, enmeshed in contradiction. To be born into the Polish gentry in Lithuania was a little like being born Anglo-Irish in Ireland.... Lithuanians are not Slavs, their language (the oldest living Indo-European tongue) was spoken by peasants and artisans ... Not quite a Lithuanian, not quite a Pole, and the political subject of another nation altogether. What he was for sure was a Roman Catholic, though this was qualified by the persistence of custom, of the old, pre-Christian earth magic of the countryside. And his education was Polish ... (Hass 1984: 182)

In the 1968 poem "Ars Poetica" Milosz brings together the challenge of openness and candor, and identifies it with the work of poetry as he sees it:

I have always aspired to a more spacious form
 that would be free from the claims of poetry or prose
 and would let us understand each other without exposing
 the author or reader to sublime agonies.
 In the very essence of poetry there is something indecent:
 a thing is brought forth which we didn't know we had in us,
 so we blink our eyes, as if a tiger had sprung out
 and stood in the light, lashing its tail. (NCP 240-41)

The self-disclosure (he continues) now popular in psychiatrists' clinics is other than the wisdom once offered in "wise books," "helping us to bear our pain and misery":

And yet the world is different from what it seems to be
and we are other than how we see ourselves in our ravings.
People therefore preserve silent integrity,
thus earning the respect of their relatives and neighbors.
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.

[*New and Collected Poems* 240-41]

After refusing to return to Poland from assignment in Washington as cultural attaché, Milosz lived in self-imposed exile in Paris. The publication of *The Captive Mind* had brought him celebrity and notoriety. He had refused the "drug" of the New Faith—communism—and was branded a traitor by intellectual circles in Paris (*Native Realm* 269). He was abashed to discover that in the West he was thought of as a prose writer, an expert on political philosophy. His poetry, available almost exclusively only in Polish, was for the most part unknown. A poet without readers, exiled from a home and culture that no longer existed, Milosz found himself named as something he knew himself not to be: "a political writer in a heroic mold." (Hass 2012: 182) Hass terms the situation a kind of double jeopardy: "Having had to deal with what history inflicted on him, he then had to deal with being seen always in terms of it ..." And as Milosz stated countless times, he understood his poetic purposes in terms other than politics, ideology, Catholicism. He knew he could quite easily disappear, in every sense, like any one among the millions lost in those years. Milosz relished the accolades his poetry earned, but especially after the destruction of Warsaw, he insisted again and again how little poetry contributes to the improvement of the human condition. In "Dedication" he asks:

What is poetry which does not save
Nations or people?
A connivance with official lies,
A song of drunkards whose throats will be cut in a moment,
Readings for sophomore girls. (*NCP* 77)

Many years later he acknowledged, "My religious readings at the time did not help me very much in making sense of myself, but recognizing the modest place of the poet as opposed to the 'priesthood of art' (which the avant-garde had continued under another name) ought to be considered a benefit." (*Milosz's ABC* 192) "Thus I have to write," he says, "to save myself from disintegration." (*Road-Side Dog* 62) Naming becomes an act of surviving, as Milosz's responded with this "silent integrity," choosing "to remain just one person" in the midst of the crises that events and politics had brought down on him. Marxism, Poland, Roman Catholicism—each came to seem to him "servile ... A failure of the religious imagination." (Hass 2012: 182-83) "It was being, the very fact of the existence of things, that always seemed to him to be mysterious, to be the place where the meaning of existence—mute, perhaps, specific beyond the power of language, singular, not quite graspable, lay." The prose poem "Esse" begins: "I looked at that face, dumbfounded. The lights of the *métro* stations flew by; I didn't notice them. What can be done if our sight lacks absolute power to devour objects ecstatically ..." and ends: "She got out at Raspail. I was left behind with the immensity of existing things. A sponge, suffering because it cannot saturate itself; a river, suffering because reflections of clouds and trees are not clouds and trees." (*NCP* 249)

Already in the early poem "Encounter" we find an unselfconscious wonder at being itself, but also at the reality of his own continuing to exist as "just one person."

We were riding through frozen fields in a wagon at dawn.
A red wing rose in the darkness.

And suddenly a hare ran across the road.
One of us pointed to it with his hand.

That was long ago. Today neither of them is alive,
Not the hare, nor the man who made the gesture.

O my love, where are they, where are they going
The flash of a hand, a streak of movement, rustle of pebbles.
I ask not out of sorrow, but in wonder. (*NCP* 27)

Wonder at what? An encounter with what? Having just stated, neither of them is alive, why ask, Where are they? Because what persists even now are the *named presences*—the flash, the streak, the rustle, experiences that are both apart and nameable. Once again, naming has made vivid something lying in the past. The wonder is that things gone can be made real again. But what remains for him? The encounter, called out with "O my love," a wonder that he himself remains, aware, made real by his own naming. Hass, who worked with Milosz for several decades as principal collaborator in Milosz's translation of his work, sees another side to the poet's reverence for being: "... If being was a mystery to him, so was ceasing to be. If there was an enemy, ... besides whatever brought so much unnecessary suffering into the world, it was oblivion, the abyss of nature and time into which all earthly endeavor seems to disappear." (Hass 2012: 183)

Having survived the upheavals of war and conquest, entangled in the polemics of literature taking root in politics, Milosz recognized the absoluteness of his choice: "All of us yearn naively for a certain point on the earth where the highest wisdom accessible to humanity at a given moment dwells, and it is hard to admit that such a point does not exist, that we have to rely only upon ourselves." (*Native Realm* 283) He doesn't try to tell truths bigger than what he's seen for himself. He speaks of his certainties. He acknowledges his follies. He speaks so as to make clear, not to persuade, not to argue, to become anyone's champion or theorist. When his correspondence with Thomas Merton began in the 1950's, Milosz confessed to Merton, "I have tried to write verse as 'naked' as possible, being against (or incapable of) involved imagery." (Faggen 34) There is in this statement an unshaken commitment to responding to life as it had presented itself to him: to his senses, his intelligence, and his desires. And to "life" as something far more mysterious than what science or a history of motives might name it, and not as a version of himself handed to him by his own religious traditions. The passion for observation remained, particularly observation in nature. His outlook, writes Walczyk, is similar to a form of contemplative observation, but at the same time altogether aware of its uninterrupted cycle of pursuing prey and being preyed upon, contradiction of "*natura devorans, natura devorata*." (263, 266) Whether as poet, essayist, novelist, or autobiographer, Milosz acknowledges the limits facing him: that he has no capacity to fend off death, to prevent the suffering of others, to make himself immune to suffering or to

causing others suffering, no capacity to give full expression to his own ideas, desires, and loves.

In "An Appeal" (1954) he writes:

If one day our words
Come so close to the bark of trees in the forest,
And to orange blossoms, that they become one with them,
It will mean that we have always defended a great hope.
How should I defend it? By naming things.

For Milosz, naming is embedded in an instant of face-to-face with an individuality, not with generalization and the categorical. Too often he had seen the individual overshadowed by ideology and categories. Moreover, he chose the work of poetry despite what he had witnessed against the background of a century whose abuses against language were themselves momentous: ideology, propaganda, totalitarianism, consumer capitalism, and the steady corruption of the concept of the human person. Here is language used in its most existentially uncomplicated way: to give names to things. From Genesis he knows that naming is the privilege given to Adam at Creation. In the chaos and suffering of the twentieth century, Milosz creates again, and thus asserts himself existentially as a human person. With this, the profoundly social poet remains aware of a poet's responsibility to exercise a social role, because in society language continues to provide the currency of life; he was scornful of the "bohemian" poet. It is striking how often his poems memorialize real individuals from his own life: the teacher Hanusevich, the librarian Miss Jadwiga, buried alive by bombs falling on Warsaw. There is a tenderness toward them, not sentimental, but an obligation to name their experience, not because he has discovered its meaning, but because he has seen the joys or follies of their lives, and their destruction as well. He testifies to the experience of others without claiming to know its meaning for them. Testify to what? His loyalty to the experiences of others as the site of their own sensibility to truth. By virtue of his own capacity to name them, even decades after they have disappeared, and make them real for himself, Milosz is witness to his reverence for being, even with all its incommensurable contradiction. Writing of himself in *Roadside Dog*, he offers a glimpse of that "society established in the soul of the individual":

Every year he would ponder what he had been spared, and that was enough to give him happiness. ... He identified himself with

prisoners of the polar night, and hence his ecstatic gratitude for every sunrise and every slice of bread. ... And when his books gained fame and the analyses were written, no literary critic would guess that behind their philosophical meditations was the image of sufferings crying to Heaven for vengeance. Only the memory of the Vorkuta prisoners could provide an unshakable measure to distinguish good from evil, and whosoever applied it was more dangerous ... than regiments and armies. (136-37)

His attention was frequently captured by human beings simply living their lives:

In my wanderings at the beginning of the Second World War, I happened to find myself, for a very short while, in the Soviet Union. I was waiting for a train at a station in one of the large cities of the Ukraine. It was a gigantic station. Its walls were hung with portraits and banners of inexpressible ugliness. A dense crowd dressed in sheepskin coats, uniforms, fur caps, and woolen kerchiefs filled every available space and tracked thick mud over the tiled floor. The marble stairs were covered with sleeping beggars, their bare legs sticking out of their tatters despite the fact that it was freezing. Over them loudspeakers shouted propaganda slogans. As I was passing through the station I suddenly stopped and looked. A peasant family—husband and wife and two children—had settled down by the wall. They were sitting on baskets and bundles. The wife was feeding the younger child; the husband, who had a dark, wrinkled face and a black, drooping mustache was pouring tea out of a kettle into a cup for the older boy. They were whispering to each other in Polish. I gazed at them until I felt moved to the point of tears. What had stopped my steps so suddenly and touched me so profoundly was their difference. This was a human group, an island in a crowd that lacked something proper to humble, ordinary human life. The gesture of a hand pouring tea, the careful, delicate handing of the cup to the child, the worried words I guessed from the movement of their lips, their isolation, their privacy in the midst of the crowd—that is what moved me. For a moment, then, I understood something that quickly slipped from my grasp. (*The Captive Mind* 248-49)

In these few moments of watching there lies an experience repeated over and over in Milosz's poetry: an emergence of meaning, recognition and naming, followed by its withdrawal into something escaping naming. Such patterning of an experience has been explored by Hans

Ulrich Gumbrecht, who describes it as “oscillation” between meaning and presence (Gumbrecht 2012: 315). Gumbrecht’s notion of a “presence effect” implies a movement of emergence and passing away, a perceptible/perceiving body and the relation of movement and body toward precise locations in space and time. Gumbrecht, by his own admission once certain that every human experience is reducible to theory, affirms on the strength of his own lived experience that “being there” is irreplaceably part of an experience, and that something happens that goes beyond what theory or description can “capture” (Gumbrecht 2004: 136-37)

Seamus Heaney remarked of Milosz in 2004, “His credibility was and remains the thing.” (Heaney xvi) The intersubjective component in the poems has an endlessly imaginative richness. Despite the many admissions of loving the glory afforded his writing, within the poetry the voice is consistently that of a lesser man: sinful, plagued with common appetites (see “A Confession” NCP 461). This acknowledgment runs through dozens of poems. It becomes more precise thanks to his own power of naming: brutally candid in assessing himself; not self-accusatory, never self-pitying, but precise in naming the man he is. Nor do attachments, allegiances, nationality or religion protect him from his own incantation. Catholic, Polish patriot, critic of communism—never are these called upon to excuse the man he names himself to be. This is altogether intentional. His inventiveness in just this matter of self-naming gives the voice of his poems the quality of *conversational counterpart*, the feeling of being face-to-face with a live presence, engaged in saying who he is and in being understood. His techniques are many. In “Preface” he says

First, plain speech in the mother tongue.
Hearing it you should be able to see,
As if in a flash of summer lightning,
Apple trees, a river, the bend of a road.

The translator of Milosz’s *Selected and Last Poems* (2005) writes that Milosz’s language is “not a mainstream journalistic Polish, or archaic, or lofty, or regional. He writes in a heterogeneous modern Polish ... Using a simple yet dignified diction ... refusing to sedate the reader with canned expressions.” (A. Milosz 271)

As we saw with “A Meadow” and “Blacksmith Shop,” Milosz uses a range of deictics to point to things that share his space and field of

vision. He does this in a way that simply assumes this is part of another's same field of vision—"I liked the bellows..." Stripped of pretension, he doesn't hesitate to step forward as his own small self. He hides nothing—not who he is, nor his failings; he has no social grace. He has no need to identify his allegiances or to proselytize. He is honest about how little he knows of many things, and is willing to speak openly only of what he has learned or seen himself. Nonetheless, he is always sure of his own experience.

This is why I think Milosz's poetic voice is so alive: it possesses what Walter Benjamin terms the *authority* of the storyteller, who "takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others"; the storyteller, says Benjamin, must be credible in himself (87). The story creates what Ricoeur calls the realm of concern—where the gaps of a story are filled in with our own reality as we invest the story with our own concern (Ricoeur 184). This storyteller presence occupies a space that has the "felt depth" of everyday life. There is in these moments of the poet's "being there"—and in the words that recreate them—a moment figured by the way we ourselves experience the world, for human experience is always temporal, embodied, intersubjective (Russon 1-2) We believe Milosz when he names the moments in the blacksmith shop because—without attempting to ensure his own credibility—he communicates a certainty going beyond words and reason. We believe him because he speaks directly of what he knows. He speaks with authority—even though only about his own experience. What is more: in his plain speech, in this space which he seems to occupy with us, his diction and his authorial gestures seem to say he needs the presence of the reader to make the words real.

This bears repeating. Milosz writes poetry that calls for the presence of others, in order for it to be *his* experience; at the same time, he offers the experience without hesitation to his reader, in order that the reader make it his own through participation in the second-person space where his act of naming occurs. The experience becomes real when placed into a space of shared experience. He witnesses only to his own experiences because he and we know this is a *shared* space. This is what made Milosz spiritual, exactly as Merton named it: "... one's own obligations to the rest of the human race, and the predicament of us all." Milosz offered a very simple statement of the poetic task in *The Witness of Poetry*: "To make present what is gone by." (114)

One is not mistaken to call Milosz's attitude often prayerful; there is loving attentiveness, an awareness of the presence of the Other; abandonment of the urge to be in control or to be the sole agent of experience. But the source of his "spiritual companionship" is far more than attitude. Milosz passed through the most dangerous places and years of the twentieth century; he lived in that barren space created by Hitler, Stalin, and their foes, a place devoid of solidarities, where to trust another person was to risk life or death. Despite this, he refuses to be other than himself; using a tone and voice that is utterly honest, naming his own experience of transcendent presence—without naming it God. *My own experience is all I have. No theory, no philosophy. My own words are all I have to name it.* This, I believe, is why I trust his testimony. In an era when the witness of a church as institution may fail, Milosz builds trust—I would even call it spiritual intimacy—by not using religion to name something profound going on between people, but accepting fullness, accepting decay and holding up this contradiction as testimony to his own existence. Milosz's companionship is for this world, where fullness passes, where "elements are welded in repulsion" (Zagajewski 382-83) He has lived on "the earth of wonder" (NCP An Appeal), where those who mourn will be consoled, where the meek find themselves heirs, where death is not an end, where one is present in the world only when one begins to name it.

An Hour

Leaves glowing in the sun, zealous hum of bumblebees,
From afar, from somewhere beyond the river, echoes of lingering voices
And the unhurried sounds of a hammer gave joy not only to me.
Before the five senses were opened, and earlier than any beginning
They waited, ready, for all those who would call themselves mortals,
So that they might praise, as I do, life, that is, happiness. (NCP 260)

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