Native Realm: A Search for Self-Definition, by Czeslaw Milosz

Jacqueline Rinaldi
Sacred Heart University

Czeslaw Milosz, *Native Realm: A Search for Self-Definition.* Translated by Catherine S. Leach. New York: Doubleday & Co., 1981. 304 pp. $12.95.

Review by Jacqueline Rindaldi

When the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1980, he was hardly known to American readers. Since then, a number of his works have been translated into English — a novel, a collection of essays, several volumes of poetry, and now his autobiography, *Native Realm: A Search for Self-Definition*, an account of his life from the year of his birth, 1911, to the early 1950s when, for political reasons, he left his native land, settling first in Paris and later in America. As autobiography, *Native Realm* is unusual, for its focus is less on the chronological details of its author's personal life than on the colliding, overlapping images of myriad landscapes, traditions, and ideologies that during his lifetime "whirled about like particles in a kaleidoscope." Tracing the dominant historical and cultural events that shaped his future as an artist as well as the future of an entire generation, Milosz makes use of a technique he calls "the telescopic eye," which perceives not only different parts of the globe but also different moments in time.

Lithuanian by birth, though Polish by nationality and culture, Milosz spent his early childhood in a tiny village on the Baltic, bordering the northernmost edge of Poland and Germany. He remembers it as a village of stunning greenness, of forests and swamps, "a rich manure heap out of which grew the butterfly of a detached and political awareness." He awakened early through the folk legends of this region to "primeval tragedies" suffered by the first inhabitants of his native land. When he learned how in 1226 Teutonic Knights in the name of the Church and Empire had subdued the tribes of Litwa (Lithuanians), the last pagans of the Western world, he concluded that the era of Christianity had been nothing more than "an epic of murder, violence and banditry," and from this awareness developed an instinctive loathing for violence disguised as ideology.

Prior to World War I, Milosz and his father, an industrial engineer on government contract, traveled to Petersburg, Siberia, and the Urals, before returning to Lithuania to settle in Wilno, a

mixed community of Lithuanians, Poles, Jews, and Byelorussians, whose languages and religions had coexisted for years. Absorbing these contradictory traditions and norms took no small amount of energy:

> When I reached adolescence, I carried inside me a museum of mobile and grimacing images: blood-smeared Seryozha, a sailor with a dagger, commissars in leather jackets, Lena, a German sergeant directing an orchestra, Lithuanian riflemen from paramilitary units, and these were mingled with a throng of peasants — smugglers and hunters, Mary Pickford, Alaskan fur trappers, and my drawing instructor.

What is most moving about the early chapters of *Native Realm* is the author's persistent effort to rediscover his roots and understand his lost homeland which, in his lifetime, belonged first to Czarist Russia, then to Poland, later to Lithuania, and finally in 1951 to the Soviet Union. "I will never imitate those who rub out their traces, disown the past," writes Milosz, "because an awareness of one's origins is like an anchor plunged into the deep, keeping one within a certain range."

The family dates its origins to Hrehory Milosz, whose signature appears in the Civil Registries of 1580. In the entire family history, the most prosperous Milosz acted as a client and administrator for the Sapieha princes at the end of the eighteenth century and acquired a valuable patrimony in the form of seven hundred thousand acres of virgin forest, which eventually yielded a fantastic fortune. Milosz's immediate family, however, though part of the intelligentsia, did not own a single acre of land, and since his father, intoxicated by the beauty and challenge of nature, preferred chasing deer and hunting wild geese to making money, Milosz experienced a material existence so primitive it would have startled proletarians in Western countries:

> Every day for weeks on end, I pressed my nose

against the windows of bookstores or shops selling scientific instruments, well aware that I could not purchase the objects of my dreams; and I learned, not how to save, but how to stifle temptations.

In the late 1800s, Wladyslaw Milosz, a wealthy but eccentric Don Juan, stormed a convent to kidnap a novice with whom he had fallen in love. He spent several weeks in prison for this piece of recklessness, and eventually married the daughter of a Jewish school teacher. His son Oscar, however, was a highly regarded poet and mystic who exerted a profound influence on Milosz during his brief visit to Paris in the early 1930s. As a visionary who "understood the history of mankind in categories of decline and punishment," Milosz writes, "he predicted that the cycle was closing and that we were entering the Apocalypse of St. John." From his uncle's early warning, Milosz gained keen insight into the catastrophe that awaited the Western world at a time, he says, "when no one in Poland believed in Hitler's ultimate victory."

A brilliant chapter evokes the ritualistic setting of Milosz's school days in Wilno:

Beeswax candles and a white suit for First Communion, the fragrance and blue haze of incense, flashes of gold from the chasuble and monstrance, the suction in the pit of your stomach from fasting as you returned from Church, the good feeling of virtue regained.

His school years were marked by an intense drive to gain recognition in literature, a quest he describes as having "all the earmarks of a search for identity formerly conferred by a coat of arms." With fondness, he recalls two teachers contending for the minds of their young students. One was the Father Prefect, an unquestioning believer, an "inquisitor" with a habit for detecting a student's guilty thought from the "twitch of a facial muscle or the tilt of a head."

From him Milosz developed, after long hours of debate over hairsplitting theological and moral issues, a fondness for verbal fencing and, ultimately, an awareness that he did not have the "makings of an atheist." The other teacher was a Latin classicist, skeptical and rationalistic, elegant in dress and habitually ironic in speech, "hissing as if he had been stuck with a pin." In part because he was forced, along with the rest of his class, to spend an hour each day translating only one line of Ovid, Milosz learned "to concentrate not only on the meaning but on the art of connecting words," a skill that earned him early success in his own craft of poetry.

Language enthusiasts should find the section in *Native Realm* dealing with East European languages of particular interest. Here Milosz writes with admirable humor about the lightness of his native tongue when contrasted to the strong musicality of Russian. He notes that after reading the poetry of Pushkin, which was like a "magical incantation [where] everything was reduced to sound," he understood that a natural desire to rival the Russian could be disastrous when writing in weakly accented languages like Polish or Czech, which are "incapable of such power of expression, such masterful iambs." What Milosz has achieved through an astute awareness of the limitation of his native language is a poetry of resonant timbre, clarity, and urgency of sense, a poetry whose precision of line and intellectual nuance is readily translatable into other languages. This stark clarity and urgency of language is well illustrated in a poem titled "Encounters," which celebrates man's ceaseless efforts to stem the unsettling vagaries of time and glimpse a meaning from his encounter with death:

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, not the man who made the gesture.

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

Bells in Winter, 1978

For a brief period in the early 1930s Milosz supported Marxism. He explains that "People of my generation absorbed Marxism through osmosis because it provided a dialectic of development." As a member of the Vagabond Club, a university group that provided a forum for leftist views, Milosz wrote revolutionary poetry until he became dissatisfied with its artistic inferiority: "For me the so-called poetry of protest had no connections with the living springs of art." After completing his law degree in 1934, Milosz spent a year studying poetry at the Alliance Francaise in Paris, before returning to Warsaw where he worked for the progressive Polish newspaper until the beginning of World War II.

When the Germans invaded Poland in 1939, Milosz fought with the Polish army for a short time before returning to Wilno, then still a free territory, but as Russian troops advanced on Lithuania from the East, he escaped across closed borders to Warsaw to join the Polish Resistance. Here, in what he describes as "the conditions of the jungle," he subsisted on potato and carrot soup, scraped for a living, as many others did, by trading cigarettes, liquor, and ladies' underwear, and worked feverishly to complete his first volume of poems, *Independent Song* (1942), a book printed on a ditto machine and hand sewn by his future wife, Janka. Seizing an opportunity to head the reconstruction of the French Institutes's bombed library in Warsaw, he spent his days, until the end of the war, learning English, reading Anglo-Saxon poetry, and translating from the works of Shakespeare and T.S. Eliot.

The account of the war years in *Native Realm* is deliberately low-keyed, anti-sensational: "It is not my intention to write a commentary for Goya's drawings, because the immensity of events calls for restraint, even dryness." But restrained as it might be,

Milosz's description of war and its aftermath reveals the anguish of a man who had the talent to transform his nightmare into a luminous poetic statement:

> Lying in the field near a highway bombarded by airplanes, I riveted my eyes on a stone and two blades of grass in front of me. Listening to the whistle of a bomb, I suddenly understood the value of matter: that stone and those two blades of grass formed a whole kingdom, an infinity of forms, shades, textures, lights. They were the universe. I had always refused to accept the division into macro- and micro-cosmos; I preferred to contemplate a piece of bark or a bird's wing rather than sunsets or sunrises. But now I saw into the depths of matter with exceptional intensity.

After the war Milosz joined the diplomatic corps of the Polish government in exile and spent four years as cultural attaché at the Polish Embassy in Washington. He returned to Warsaw in 1951, but left soon after, with the tacit approval of the Soviet government, for a position in the Polish Embassy in Paris. Since 1960 he has lived in Berkeley, California, where he is currently Professor of Slavic Languages and Literature.

Native Realm is not an easy book. While its density of thought is essential for capturing the ambiguities and contradictions of the two varieties of European totalitarianism experienced by Milosz, one is likely to wish that its author had included more information about his family relationships. Siblings never appear and his mother and wife are each dismissed in one brief sentence. Still, it is a magnificent work, wide in scope, probing in subject matter, poignant in its use of language, a book likely to leave most readers grateful to the poet who steeped himself in memory and, in his words, refused to "disown the past."