

review. I know of no reason to question his integrity or sincerity. But a good many readers of this book will not be prepared to sift the ideological ambiguities that attended its conception and execution and cast aside the compulsory dogmatics for the insightful and rewarding observations it contains.

Reviewed by DONALD W. TREADGOLD

History as Poetic Muse

Selected Poems, by Czeslaw Milosz, *New York: Ecco Press, 1980. 129 pp. \$8.95.*

IN THE WEST we take it for granted that there is a fundamental split between poetry and politics. This is not to say that the two do no meet on occasion, but when they do, as A. Alvarez has observed, it is usually at great cost:

The complexity, tension and precision of modern poetry simply don't go with the language of politics, with its vague rhetoric and dependence on clichés....It amounts to the belief that political poetry, *as poetry*, must be relatively but debilitatingly simple-minded. This means that, although it may on occasion be effective, it can't finally be "good," since our criteria of excellence are defined by qualities more intuned and subtly discriminating than politics leaves room for.¹

Alvarez held that this fundamental dichotomy did not hold true of the poetry of Zbigniew Herbert, one of a number of leading contemporary Polish poets whose work Czeslaw Milosz has translated and for whom he has tirelessly proselytized. Similar exception should also be made for the poetry of Milosz himself, since political implications in his work are as inescapable, as deeply embedded, as its philosophical and ethical emphases. History, as one critic put

it, has dictated Milosz' themes:² the Blitzkrieg in Poland, the savagery of Nazi occupation, and the subsequent Stalinist terror and repression. Having lived through these events, Milosz, a man not given to hyperbole, has said that he considers his poetry to be a kind of higher politics, an unpolitical politics.

Milosz, who was born in Lithuania in 1911, received a Catholic education and took a law degree at the University in Wilno. He began writing poetry during the early 1930's along with a group of young poets who were called "catastrophists," for their Cassandralike prophecies of planetary cataclysm. After the Blitzkrieg, Milosz went back to Warsaw, where he was to spend the war years writing for clandestine presses as part of the resistance movement. He has written of the profound shock and terror brought about by the Nazi upheaval in *The Captive Mind*, which appeared in 1951 and brought him immediate international recognition:

A man is lying under machine gun fire on a street in an embattled city. He looks at the pavement and sees a very amusing sight: the cobblestones are standing upright like the quills of a porcupine. The bullets hitting against their edges displace and tilt them. Such moments in the consciousness of a man *judge* all poets and philosophers....In the intellectuals who lived through the atrocities of war in Eastern Europe there took place what one might call the elimination of emotional luxuries.³

Milosz' prose in *The Captive Mind* and in his autobiographical work, *Native Realm*, are distinguished by a pithy apothegmatic quality, by their lucidity and wit, and his verse no less so. A central section of the *Selected Poems*, and central perhaps also to his work as a whole, is occupied by a group of poems written in Warsaw during the years 1942-1945. "Dedication," bearing the dateline Warsaw, 1945, opens this section:

You whom I could not save
Listen to me.

Try to understand this simple speech as
I would be ashamed of another.
I swear, there is in me no wizardry of
words.
I speak to you in silence like a cloud or
tree.

Simplicity of speech, but not necessarily
of meaning, varies for the poet propor-
tionately to the freight of emotion a poem
is to carry. The speech is that of a man who
has discarded "emotional luxuries," and
for whom poetic ornaments have become
impediments. As the poem progresses, it
takes on a cutting edge:

What is poetry which does not save
Nations and people?
A connivance with official lies,
A song of drunkards whose throats will
be cut in a moment,
Readings for sophomore girls.
That I wanted good poetry without
knowing it,
That I discovered, late, its salutary aim,
In this and only this I find salvation.

The poem concludes with a kind of votive
offering to the dead to assuage the poet's
own grief and the guilt that haunts every
man who survived Warsaw, 1945:

They used to pour on graves millet or
poppy seeds
To feed the dead who would come
disguised as birds.
I put this book here for you, who once
lived
So that you should visit us no more.

The poem "A Poor Christian Looks at
the Ghetto" was written during the ghetto
uprising of 1943. Spondees as relentless as
drumbeats establish the rhythm:

Bees build around red liver,
Ants build around black bone.
It has begun: the tearing, the trampling
on silks,
It has begun: the breaking of glass,
wood, copper, nickel...
Poof! Phosphorescent fire from yellow
walls
Engulfs animal and human hair.

Human life may end, but life will not end.

Bees and ants will continue to build
around and out of human destruction.
Meanwhile, death's accountant, the "guard-
ian mole," goes about his business:

Slowly, boring a tunnel, the guardian
mole makes his way,
With a small red lamp fastened to his
forehead.
He touches buried bodies, counts them,
pushes on...
What will I tell him, I, a Jew of the
New Testament,
Waiting two thousand years for the sec-
ond coming of Jesus?
My broken body will deliver me from his
sight
And he will count me among the helpers
of death:
The uncircumcised.

As the final paragraph emerges from
death's underground, we become sensible
of the passion that has driven it. As T.S.
Eliot asked in another poem, "After such
knowledge, what forgiveness?"

Emerging from the war, Milosz and
other Polish poets, such as Herbert and
Tadeusz Rozewicz, shared an extreme
distrust not only of poetry but of all art and
artifice. They asked themselves some hard
questions: "Poetry, after all, is embedded
in the humanistic tradition and is
defenseless in the midst of an all-pervading
savagery. The act of writing a poem is an
act of faith; yet if the screams of the tor-
tured are audible in the poet's room, is not
his activity an offense to human suffering?
And if the next hour may bring his death
and the destruction of his manuscript,
should the poet engage in such a
pastime?"⁴ Thus, only the concrete, the
tangible, can be trusted: "Only the village
well, the roof of a hut, or a plow were real,
not the speeches of statesmen recalled now
with ferocious irony. The land was
singularly naked, as it can only be for peo-
ple without a state, torn from the safety of
their habits."⁵ And even so, there is little
assurance that what has weight and solidity
will endure, particularly, as in the poem
"Should, Should Not," where man will
leave his imprint:

A man should not love the moon.
 An axe should not lose weight in his
 hand.
 His garden should smell of rotting ap-
 ples
 And grow a fair amount of nettles.
 A man when he talks should not use
 words that are dear to him,
 Or split open a seed to find out what is
 inside it...
 When he steps on marble stairs,
 The boor, he may try to chip them with
 his boot
 As a reminder that the stairs will not last
 forever.

Pity, sympathy, and anger, Milosz said
 in *Native Realm*, would give his poetry
 directness. And the humanist had learned
 in a hard school that there was no escape
 either from politics or from history:

I was right in rejecting the light from
 the East [from Russia], but the Com-
 munist were right also. Thanks to the
 Red Army, they soon seized power and
 then I had to serve them. Whoever
 claims that force cannot suffice as an
 argument overlooks the character of
 politics, where the winner takes all. If it
 were possible to withdraw from politics,
 then the values of truth and ethics
 would hold. But it is not possible to
 withdraw, so all one can do is try to save
 these values or embody them in
 politics.⁶

He is humble before the task of undertak-
 ing his book, which opens with "The Task"
 by way of invocation:

In fear and trembling, I think I would
 fulfill my life
 Only if I brought myself to make a
 public confession
 Revealing a sham, my own and my
 epoch:
 We were permitted to shriek in the
 tongue of dwarfs and demons
 But pure and generous words were for-
 bidden
 Under so stiff a penalty that whoever
 dared to pronounce one
 Considered himself as a lost man.

It is an irony that this selection of Milosz'
 poems, which was originally published in
 1973, had lapsed from print by 1980, when
 he received the Nobel laureateship in
 literature. The selection was hastily ex-
 humed, revised very slightly, and rushed
 back into print in time to celebrate the fact
 that its author had won the Prize. Milosz
 himself had a hand in translating some
 three quarters of the poems from the
 Polish, but the translations are the work of
 several hands.

Reviewed by JACK FLAVIN

¹. A. Alvarez, *Beyond All this Fiddle: Essays 1955-1967* (New York, 1969), p. 142. ². Paul Zweig, "A Polish Exile's Poems," *New York Times Book Review*, July 7, 1974, pp. 6-7. ³. Czeslaw Milosz, *The Captive Mind* (New York, 1953), p. 41. ⁴. Czeslaw Milosz, *The History of Polish Literature* (New York, 1969), p. 458. ⁵. Czeslaw Milosz, *Native Realm* (New York, 1968), p. 204. ⁶. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

Theological Retrospect

Faith Seeking Understanding: Essays Theological and Critical, by Robert E. Cushman, *Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1981. xv + 373 pp. \$19.95.*

WHAT IS THEOLOGY is a question that has always exercised the mind of theologians. Contemporary theologians often seem to function on the thesis that theology is what theologians do. They are therefore open to the criticism that they have renounced the age-old ambition of exploring cognitional theory. In other words, a point has been reached, in the evolution of theological thought, where one cannot know what theology should be and what theologians should do. Theologizing has become irrational, as one can well see by reading a number of contemporary authors, from