Milosz in Memory

In his memoir, 'Striking Through the Masks,' a Santa Cruz writer recalls his encounters with poet Czeslaw Milosz

By Morton Marcus

The gates of grammar closed behind him.
Search for him now in the groves and wild forests of the dictionary.
Czeslaw Milosz

I

IN THE FALL of 1968, a few months after I had moved to Santa Cruz, I took part in a reading with Ronald Johnson, Dennis Schmitz and Jack Marshall at the University of California at Berkeley. The occasion was the publication of *The Young American Poets*, the first all-inclusive anthology of new American poetry in 10 years, and the publisher had given the book a big national publicity campaign, featuring poets in the anthology reading in the sections of the country where they lived.

For our reading, one of three in the Bay Area, the publisher hired Kenneth Rexroth to be master of ceremonies and guide, and treated us to a dinner at a restaurant of Rexroth's choice. Rexroth chose a wonderful French bistro in Berkeley, fussed over the menu as if we were his children and ordered several bottles of expensive wine while regaling the four of us with wonderful tales and some highly unorthodox opinions, such as his comment that the anthology was already passé, since the poetry of the future would be

"off the page," or completely based on performance.

Slightly inebriated, but in an elated mood, the five of us made our way by foot to the campus to find a crowd of 300 or 400 waiting for us in Wheeler Hall. I read second, after which there was an intermission and members of the audience, clucking their praises at what they had heard, crowded around us. One of their number, a middle-aged man with high cheekbones, pushed to the front of the others and stood quivering in front of me. "You come home with me!" he demanded in a strong Slavic accent. Tears were coursing down his cheeks, and he had obviously been crying for some time.

I didn't know what to say and was as confused as the people around me.

"Come home with me!" he repeated.

"Well, thank you," I finally said, "but— "

"I open special wine for us," he interrupted me.

The crowd around us began to thin.

"I'd like to," I said, "but I have classes tomorrow and a long ride ... "

The man straightened, regained his composure and said, "Oh, you think I am weird," and stalked away, heading for Rexroth, who was talking to several people. The man grabbed Rexroth by the arm and dragged him over to me. "Kenneth, introduce!" he commanded.

"Well, yes," said Rexroth in his most grandiose world-weary manner, as if bored by the man's feverish behavior. "Morton Marcus," he said, "this is Czeslaw Milosz."

I was surprised, but immediately understood the man's agitation. For my reading I had selected a number of poems from my forthcoming book, citing the influence on it of post-World War II East European poetry, especially Polish poetry, and recommended Milosz's anthology *Post-War Polish Poetry* to the audience. I was honored to meet him, and grasped his hand warmly.

"Wonderful poetry," he said, obviously extremely moved. "Now you come home with me."

I refused again, once more citing my ride back to Santa Cruz that night and early classes the next day as my excuse, but we made an appointment for dinner at his house two weeks later.

In 1968, Milosz was virtually unknown as a poet in the United States. His reputation here, if he had one, was based on a political volume in which he described the reasons for his defection from communist Poland in 1951, and another volume, a novel, about the miseries of living under a communist regime.

The first book, *The Captive Mind,* as well as the second, *Seizure of Power*, came out in the 1950s. Milosz spent the remainder of the decade in Paris, where he had defected, struggling to support himself and his family, but since 1960 he had quietly taught in the Slavic languages department at Berkeley. Like many other artists living in the United States in political exile, he was renowned in his own country, but unknown and ignored here.

Two weeks after the meeting in Wheeler, my wife and I and our two small daughters pulled up to Milosz's house off Grizzly Peak Boulevard in Berkeley. It was a small house with a steep roof, set in a thicket of trees and foliage, and looked like a cottage out of a Grimm's fairy tale.

It was November, so darkness had already descended. Our knock on the thick wooden door was answered by Milosz himself. He was excited to see us but dismayed at first by our arriving with our 6- and 1-year-olds in tow. I explained that we couldn't afford baby-sitters, and Milosz, calling to his wife for assistance, good-humoredly found a place for the girls to amuse themselves, and the visit began in the way—I gathered from Milosz's renewed enthusiasm—he imagined it should have started.

He formally introduced us to his wife, Anka, a striking woman with straight white hair and bangs, a sharp nose and a kindly manner, who had taken the girls to play in the Miloszes' youngest son's room. Then Milosz opened one

of the promised bottles of wine, and while Anka and Wilma talked in the kitchen, he hustled me to his study where he told me, with a feverish emphasis I was beginning to suspect was his manner, about the new preface he was writing for the next edition of *Post-War Polish Poetry* that Penguin was bringing out the following year.

It was written, he said, with me in mind. He had been impressed by my poetry, but he wanted to warn me—and other young poets—not to overuse mordant irony. Relying on such irony in one's poems, he said, was tantamount to accepting the horrors perpetrated by governments and individuals, since it implied in its tone and attitude an acceptance of them as the way the world worked. At times, irony is fine to warn the readers of impending political or social catastrophes, he said, but when the catastrophes occur, the poet has to sing songs of hope and redemption, for that, in the end, is the primal direction of the human spirit.

He spoke with an orator's vigor, and I was once more beside myself with humility and gratefulness that he would be so moved by my poems that he would write a warning to me and my generation concerning a dangerous path he was afraid we were following. I was so struck by his passionate words that the whole tenor of my work changed from then on. It was as if he had expunged sarcastic irony from my soul.

After he stopped talking, he calmed down, and all four of us spent a pleasant evening getting to know each other and talking about literature and the world. For the rest of the evening, Milosz was not only composed and charming, but subdued, and I got the impression that his agitation at the reading and earlier in the evening had to do with the passionate warning he had delivered to me earlier in the evening like a wisdom figure out of some Slavic folk tale.

We visited the Miloszes several times after that, and I remember on one occasion two months later how upset Czeslaw was about the strange death in Thailand of his friend Thomas Merton, the great Catholic contemplative. Milosz was a Roman Catholic at heart, and his continued search for spiritual meaning in a

world where moments of transcendent beauty implied a godhead amid the horrors of history and the dehumanization of science and technology can be understood in that context.

Certainly Milosz's formidable intellect was fed and honed by a classic European Catholic education, as our conversations revealed early on, but it was his Slavic soul that drew me to him like a magnet. If he embodied the exile's isolation I had felt all my life, he also exemplified the Slavic personality in his passion as well as his intellect.

Nowhere are both attitudes more clearly voiced than in his poem "To Robinson Jeffers," where he delineates the difference between the Slavic and Anglo/Nordic temperaments. The poem is also an excellent example of Milosz's methodology—a strong intellectual argument suffused with an intense concrete sensuousness. Or is it an intense concrete sensuousness suffused with a strong intellectual argument?

Although I thought I came to understand Czeslaw in our handful of meetings in 1968 and 1969, I was totally unprepared for the dramatic evening I was to spend with him in the spring of 1970.

II

In 1970, I was the State Department's West Coast host for the great Yugoslav poet Vasko Popa. Through an enthusiastic Milosz, I arranged the second of two readings in Northern California to take place at the Slavic Languages Department at UC-Berkeley, and four nights after he arrived, Popa, his interpreter and I found ourselves on the Berkeley campus.

Milosz had primed his colleagues and students, and an audience of several hundred crowded into a small auditorium. Milosz was very excited and, his face flushed, ran from one side of the room to the other, introducing Popa to one person here and another one there, and making sure everything was in place for the reading. He had greeted Popa with a warm embrace and kept returning to him, saying several sentences in French before he would rush off again.

Vasko and I presented the same bilingual program we had at our first reading and, as before, received an enthusiastic response.

Afterward, Milosz hurried us away from well-wishers and told me to drive to his house. When we arrived, we were greeted by what seemed most of the audience at the reading. Cars lined both sides of the narrow street and it seemed that more than a hundred people were jammed inside Milosz's small fairytalelike cottage in the forested hills above Berkeley.

Milosz had arrived before us and, with face still flushed, was moving with Anka from group to group, making sure everyone was taken care of. Several of the students came up to Popa, but most of them spoke neither Serbo-Croat nor French, and, his interpreter lost somewhere in the crowd, soon Vasko was ensconced alone on a sofa with a glass of red wine in either hand. Now that his responsibilities in California were over, he looked relaxed and pleased, and stared in glassy-eyed exhaustion at the milling guests. His quiet contentment was disturbed only by Milosz, who would break away from his duties as host to join Vasko and speak to him animatedly in French.

Milosz was obviously keyed up by Popa's presence. I thought I understood his excitement. He and Vasko had been in the resistance against the Nazi invaders in their separate countries, neither one knowing about the other, but both engaged in a common cause. Both of them had survived as well, while many of their friends had not, and each had gone on to be an important literary figure not only in his respective country but throughout Europe. It made no difference to Milosz, a staunch opponent of communism, what Popa's politics were. He and Popa shared a brotherly bond that was welded together by history—and blood.

For the most part, Popa listened to Milosz, smiling and nodding. He seemed very comfortable talking to him, and his demeanor radiating affection. I watched the two of them with mounting emotions, pictures fluttering through my mind of haggard refugee faces and bombed out cities.

The students strolled around the two men or sat in groups on the carpet, and it seemed that the world was going on around Popa and Milosz who were encapsulated in a bubble of time none of the guests could understand or were willing to allow themselves to imagine, even though they certainly knew that both men had experienced some of the most traumatic historical events of the century.

The guests, in fact, seemed totally absorbed in their own concerns. Many of them wore white handkerchiefs as armbands which identified them as demonstrators against the government's sending troops into Cambodia. This group was going straight from the party to the staging area of a huge protest march that was to take place the following morning.

Milosz talked to Vasko more vehemently as the evening wore on, darting away to refill his glass or say good night to a departing guest. Soon he was more flushed than ever and slightly drunk. The party began to thin. Those who stayed were the students wearing white armbands. They stood talking in groups or chatted while seated on the floor. At one point, Milosz, returning from refilling his glass, almost fell over one of the seated figures.

"What do you think you are doing?" he asked the person, a young man in a white shirt who looked at him uncomprehendingly.

"What do you think you are doing with that armband?" Milosz explained, swaying and pointing at the white handkerchief on the young man's arm. The young man looked down at his arm, then up at Milosz.

"We are demonstrating against U.S. involvement in Cambodia."

"And what are you demonstrating *for*?" Milosz retorted.

"For peace and love," replied a young girl seated in the group. Milosz swayed, saliva flecking his lips, clearly belligerent.

"Love? Love for what?" he asked in a challenging voice.

The party had grown silent and everyone in the room was staring at Milosz and the girl.

"Love for everything and everyone," the girl replied.

"I taught you better than that," Milosz growled. "If you love everything and everyone, you love nothing. Love is selective."

The young man Milosz had first interrogated now came to the girl's rescue. "We demonstrate to stop the injustice going on in Vietnam and now Cambodia," he said.

Milosz's face was crimson.

"Children!" he spat out. "You are children! You know nothing! If you marched in Poland or the Soviet Union, they would shoot you down."

The girl was now incensed and said, "What's wrong with love? It's the only way to stop what is going on. We have to love each other."

"Love, love, love!" mocked Milosz, his voice rising to a shout. "Talk to me about love when they come into your cell one morning, line you all up, and say 'You and you, step forward. It's your time to die—unless any of your friends loves you so much he wants to take your place.'"

Shocked silence washed over the room. Milosz blinked and swayed, his feet planted angrily. Then he hoisted himself erect and made his way over to Vasko, where, in agitated French, he translated what had just taken place. Vasko listened, nodding and smiling, his eyes half closed, balancing the two half-filled wine glasses on his knees.

The young man in the group Milosz had just harangued snickered and murmured some words to the others who laughed and turned toward Milosz. Other chortles and snickers sprouted around the room. Milosz almost certainly heard them, but chose to ignore them and continued talking to Popa.

Once more I visualized the two of them encapsulated in a time bubble. In no way could the students fathom the agony as well as the anger that prompted Milosz's words. It was an anger at the memory of millions of dead bodies, an agony felt for all those who had lost their lives in another time and place. At the same time, Milosz seemed incapable of

understanding the young people's commitment to their history and the lives they were seeing destroyed around *them*. It was one of those moments filled with tragic irony, the kind of irony Milosz never abandoned in his work, and which is all too poignantly a part of the human condition.

III

I continued to see Milosz on and off, although my trips to the San Francisco Bay Area became more infrequent as the years went on. After he won the Nobel Prize in 1980, Milosz was extraordinarily busy, in demand everywhere, and I felt uncomfortable bothering him. When he came to read at the University of California at Santa Cruz, Milosz asked specifically to see me, and at the party after his reading he asked the host to allow us to talk alone in an unused room.

He asked after me, and was sorry to hear about my divorce, and told me that Anka was ill. It was a quiet meeting, a father asking after his long-absent son. A few years later, Bob Hass, who had become his reader as well as translator, plucked me out of an audience waiting for Milosz to read in San Jose and told me Czeslaw wanted to see me backstage. There was a brief but warm meeting, and I congratulated him on the many honors that had been bestowed on him since I had last seen him.

Our last meeting was at the reception following another reading he gave, again in San Jose. It was 1989, and Milosz was to fly to Poland several days later, his first visit to his homeland, I think, since his defection in Paris in 1951. Anka had died three years before and Czeslaw had a new female partner who acted as organizer and go-between.

When I told her I was an old friend and wanted to say hello, she led me to him. His eyes were rheumy, and he had aged greatly. I said hello and realized he didn't know me. I tried to spark his memory by briefly recalling our first meeting in Wheeler Hall and Popa's reading, but he didn't remember what I was referring to. I smiled warmly, shook his hand and took my leave.

Oh, yes, I was embarrassed—and feeling the stares of the people around him. A few moments later, his new companion, who later became his wife, came up to me and said Czeslaw wanted to see me. When I went up to him, he had tears in his eyes and held his arms out to embrace me, "Morton, Morton, of course I remember you," he said. We talked for several minutes and he asked me to write and send my new book to him. I did, and he wrote back the day before he left for Poland. It was good to see me, he said in the letter, and he liked the book, a sequence of poems about my ancestors in Poland and Russia, but he remembered nothing about Popa's reading or his visit to his house.

In Milosz's last comment, the irony he had warned me about 20 years before is painfully evident—although it is of a different order than sarcasm. As an exile in a foreign land and an alien culture, he returned again and again in his poetry and essays to memories of the Poland in which he had grown to manhood—a Poland that had vanished first with the Nazi invasion and then the communist takeover.

In fact, memory is one of the major subjects of Milosz's poetry, along with spiritual decay and the search for a moral foothold in the ruins of 20th-century history. That he would not remember meeting such an important fellow poet as Popa, who represented a connection with that vanished world, a meeting that must have been one of the more memorable events of his first decade in an America which ignored him and his country's history, is disarmingly ironic, and I can't help thinking that my rescuing that memory with this remembrance may be the kindest act I could perform for him —and, of course, that is an irony too.

Morton Marcus, Santa Cruz County's 1999 artist of the year, is the author of 10 books of poetry and fiction. His most recent book, 'Moments Without Names: New & Selected Prose Poems,' appeared in 2002. This article is from 'Striking Through the Masks,' a memoir in progress. 'Second Space: New Poems,' by Czeslaw Milosz will be published Oct. 5 by the Ecco Press.
