

From Miłosz's ABC's

Czesław Miłosz

Wilno, Wilna
on the bank of

CITY

I have thought a great deal about the phenomenon of the city, but not at all about the silly slogan "*Miasto, masa, maszyna*" ("Metropolis, masses, machine"—a slogan of the Polish avant-garde). I have had occasion to live in very large metropolises, in Paris and New York, but my first city was a provincial capital, barely different, yet different, from a village, and it was that city that supplied the data for my imagination. I can imagine Wilno in its various stages, as I can hardly do elsewhere.

Take, for example, Wilno of the Enlightenment or Romanticism. Those stinking piles of garbage, the sewage streaming down the center of the roadways, the dust or mud that one had to wade through. But the upper-class men and women (am I the last living person who heard the words "Your Honor" used in ordinary daily speech?) didn't move to town to live out their old age, but settled in the manor houses in Antokol (Antakalnis), because they felt at home there, and didn't have far to go to attend daily mass.

The bells of forty churches pealed while the women who lived in the numerous brothels received officers and students—in other words, everything took place all together, the high and the low, not as in memoirs which beautify the past. Certainly, after the French soldiers encamped on Cathedral Square, that crowd of men dressed in the strangest clothing—in anything, just to get some protection from the frost, in copes and chasubles. After the epidemics, the field hospitals, the thousands of buried corpses, some sort of harmony returned, and the professors would go to the Romers' house on Bakszta Street, the seat of the Masonic lodge, where they started publishing a satirical magazine, "Gutter News."

In the immediate vicinity of the tower of St. John's the narrow lanes of the Jewish quarter had their own affairs: the great Gaon's struggle against disrespect for the letter of the law evinced by the Hasidim, who had moved up from the south; preserving the memory of Walentyn Potocki, a righteous man, who had converted to Judaism in Amsterdam and was burned at the stake in Wilno; and also, *sha sha*, talk about Officer Gradé, who had been hidden in a pious Jewish household, and about how he had already recovered from his wounds and decided to become a Jew, had himself circumcised, and intended to marry the daughter of the house. This was the man whose descendant would be a poet in the Yiddish language, Chaim Grade, a member of the Yung Vilne poets' group, which was parallel to our Polish language group "Żagary."

The city is alive for me, then—there's nothing to be done about it—simultaneously today, yesterday, and the day before yesterday. Also in the year 1655, and that is because of the discovery in the subbasements of the Church of the Dominicans of a large number of skeletons dressed in *kon-*



Bernardinien Lane, Wilno

tusze—the traditional clothes of the Polish gentry—and silk robes, evidence of a massacre by the Russian forces who occupied Wilno briefly at that time. As it also exists in the year 1992, when I found myself there after fifty-two years of absence, and wrote a poem about walking through a city of phantoms.

Like the cities of Silesia, Wilno wavered between two cultures during its history. First it was a settlement of merchants from old Rus, perhaps from Novgorod, with a large number of wooden Orthodox churches, which have all vanished; most likely, they burned down. Wilna (with an "a") was its old name, derived from the small Wilna River, which in my youth was called the Wilenka. When Giedymin transferred his capital here from Troki, the city, because the grand duchy's population was predominantly East Slavic and Orthodox, looked toward the East—especially since Old Belorussian was the language of official documents and the *Statuty litewskie* (Lithuanian Statutes) were written in it. But after Lithuania's rulers were baptized, the city grew more and more Roman Catholic and its churches were built first in the Gothic and then in the Baroque style. That indicated a Polish influence.

The Polonization of Wilno and the surrounding area continued through the eighteenth century, and in the nineteenth it came into conflict with

Russianization. The population of the villages on the outskirts of Wilno gradually changed from speaking Lithuanian to speaking Polish, but had Lithuania remained a Soviet republic, most likely they would have adopted Russian. I ought not to conceal my fear of the East, which in my mind has the shape of a bottomless crater or a boggy maelstrom. In this regard, I am probably a typical specimen of a Pole from that region. Tsarist historians worked feverishly to publish documents demonstrating the Eastern Slavic nature, if not the absolute Russianness, of the city, but the rebirth of Lithuanian sentiment and Lithuanian nationalism spoiled their plans. Similarly, the local dialect, referred to as "simple talk," succumbs, like Belorussian and Polish, to Russification, because they are all Slavic languages; Lithuanian, as a non-Slavic language, can put up a successful resistance.

NEMO, CAPTAIN

A fighter for freedom, disenchanted, melancholic, and oh-so romantic—that is the hero of Jules Verne's novels *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* and *The Mysterious Island*. A revolutionary fighting for the liberation of his country. Verne made him a Hindu of aristocratic birth. After his defeat he made use of his gift for invention, because he was also a brilliant scientist, and far from humanity he

measured the oceans with his underwater vessel, the *Nautilus*. He took the name Nemo, which means "nobody" in Latin. A bitter misanthrope, devoid of any illusions about the human species, he was forever yielding to emotions of pity and empathy, coming to the aid of the shipwrecked in *The Mysterious Island*.

My generation read Jules Verne in our childhood, and Captain Nemo, so like the heroes of Polish Romantic literature, was our favorite character. Which explains the provenance of that name in wartime Poland.

Around 1960 I received a letter from Cracow from a poet whose name I did not know then, Stanisław Czycz. Here is what he wrote in it. It happened during the German occupation; he was fifteen at the time. He was interested in technical subjects and had no literary interests at all. He used to go over to Krzeszowice to visit a friend with similar interests and there, in the attic, they assembled a motorcycle to use after the war. They became curious about a suitcase that was lying in the attic. It turned out that his friend's father, a railway worker, had found it in Cracow in an empty train after the passengers had all been caught in a roundup and sent to Auschwitz. The two friends opened the suitcase. In it was a black cloak, a top hat, and a magician's apparatus, along with a poster announcing a performance by Captain Nemo. Also a roll of paper containing poems under the title "Voices of Poor People."

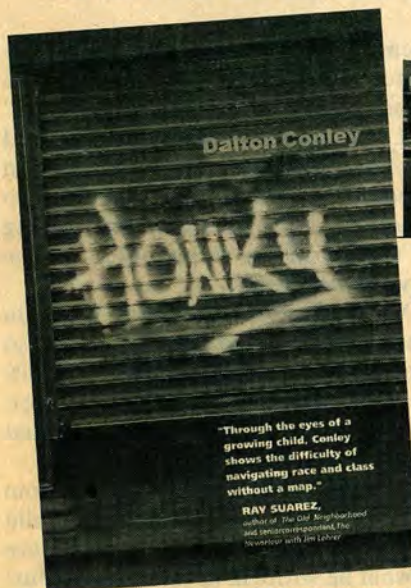
"I didn't know what poetry was" (I am summarizing what Czycz wrote in his letter), "but those poems affected me so powerfully that I began to write myself." Soon the war came to an end and the Union of Writers resumed its activities, and then Czycz presented a manuscript of his own poems for evaluation, but intermingling them, to strengthen the effect, as he later explained, with "Voices of Poor People." He was summoned and bawled out. They asked him where he'd gotten those poems, because they were Miłosz's. He, however, had never heard that name. And that's how I became responsible for making Czycz a poet—who can say, whether to his benefit or harm?

And Captain Nemo? Who was he, from what circles? Probably from Warsaw, because copies of "Voices of Poor People," a cycle I wrote late in 1943, could only have been circulating there. Somehow, the underwater vessel harmonizes wonderfully with the top hat and black cloak of an itinerant magician. The gradation of the fates of these two figures is horrifying, however: first the struggle of a romantic hero for the freedom of nations, then his disillusionment, and finally death in Auschwitz. Because I have not been able to find a single trace, not one piece of information about Captain Nemo the magician, I have to conclude that it is probable he died an anonymous death there.

POLISH LANGUAGE

There is no way to rationalize one's love for a language, just as one cannot

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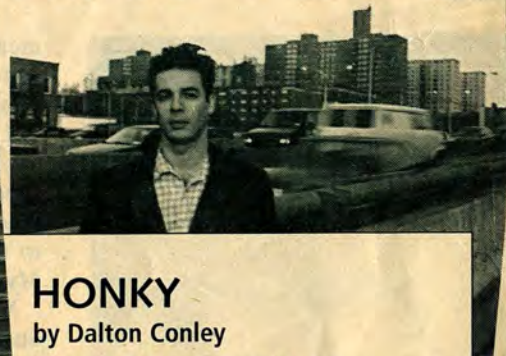
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rationalize love for one's mother. They are probably the same thing; it's not for nothing that we say "our mother tongue." Most of my life has been lived outside of Poland; just count it—the Russian years of my childhood, then France, then America. And unlike those whose Polish becomes shaky after ten or fifteen years abroad, I never had any hesitations. I felt confident in my language and I think that is why I write only in it, poems and prose, out of pride, since only its rhythms sounded in my ears, and without them I would have had no hope that what I was doing was good.

My first attempts at learning to read are hazy. No doubt my mother taught me, because it was in the spring of 1918 in Szetejnie. But I remember the garden table (round?) in what I think was a shady bower of lilacs and spirea where I formed my letters under my mother's watchful eye. It cost her a lot of effort to catch hold of me in the garden, because I hated those writing lessons, I wriggled, sobbed, and screamed that I would never learn. What would have happened had someone told me then that I would become a professional scribbler? I had never heard of such a thing.

The language is my mother, literally and metaphorically. It is certainly my home, which I carry around the world on my wanderings. This is remarkable, because except for brief periods I was not immersed in a Polish-speaking atmosphere. In Szetejnie Polish was the language of the local squires, but it was peppered with Lithuanian words, since the surrounding villages were Lithuanian. Later, Russia and my bilingualism. Finally, Wilno, undoubtedly pure Polish, if we're speaking of my family, the intelligentsia, and the school, although its foundation was the dialect referred to as "simple talk," plus the Yiddish of the Jewish masses and the Russian of the Jewish intelligentsia.

Certainly, pre-war Warsaw and the years I spent there during the German occupation. But immediately afterward I was surrounded by English and French. In my rejection of imposing a profound change on myself by going over to writing in a different language, I perceive a fear of losing my identity, because it is certain that when we switch languages we become someone else.

I was a citizen of an ideal land that existed more in time than in space. It was created by old translations of the Bible, church songs, Kochanowski, Mickiewicz, contemporary poetry. How that land compared with the real country is unclear. That whole painful complex of being Polish and wearing, as one's own, the many crooked, caricaturelike mugs of the human mass, whose individual features are depressing. Against that complex I set the heroes of my language. In my youth I didn't see this very clearly, since only *Pan Tadeusz* existed as a base, the norm. Today I enumerate them: the anonymous monk who translated the so-called *Putawski Psalter* in the fifteenth century; Father Leopolda, translator of the Bible, 1561; Father Jakub Wujek; Daniel Mikołajewski, translator of the Protestant Gdańsk Bible, 1632; Mikołaj Sęp Szarzyński; Piotr Kochanowski, the translator of Torquato Tasso. Next, the classics of the eighteenth century, poets and translators; they normalized the language

which Mickiewicz and Słowacki later employed.

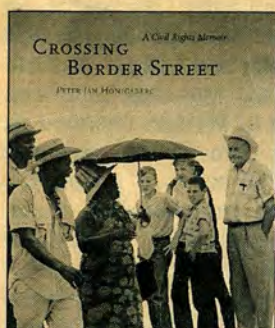
The closer we get to my own time, the more translators there are, since I became aware that translations are of great importance in a language's development and changes. Boy-Zelenski and Edward Porębowicz—even if his *Divine Comedy* is linguistically flawed because it is freighted with the idiom of Young Poland; still, his translations of Provençal, Celtic, and English ballads are important. Among my contemporaries, there are many to whom I would like to bow, and this softens my judgments of People's Poland, because good translators did impressive work then. Thanks to them, people studied Polish in Leningrad and Moscow in order to read Western literature in Polish translations.

By writing in Polish, wherever one may live one is connected to a collective work that has been developing for generations. One also cannot avoid thinking about the appalling history of that country. Aleksander Wat used to say that Poland does not have a literature commensurate with its tragic history; that instead of serious works, it has the literature of a clique. When, during my years abroad, I mentally compared the historical knowledge of my contemporaries who wrote in English or French with my own knowledge, I had to admit that mine was depressingly broad, and that raised the question of what I should do with it. For example, does my book *Native Realm* not have the characteristics of a textbook for the Western public, which was inclined to throw the entire "East" into a single bag?

The history of the European countries abounds in misfortune, and I have no intention of entering into a competition over horrors. Still, there is a level of complication where it is difficult to understand anything, and this is the case of the lands of the former Polish Res Publica or commonwealth and the nations who once inhabited it. To confirm this, all one has to do is refer to the mutual accusations in Polish-Jewish conversations or to Polish-Ukrainian mutual accusations.

"And in the Spring, let me see Spring, and not Poland." That cry by the poet Jan Lechoń in 1918 summarizes the way every Polish writer feels torn, even today. It might seem easy to choose to write exclusively about individual life, about the "universal human" problems of time passing, of love and death, but in the background, whether we are conscious of it or not, that other thing is lurking there, unnamed even to this day, or named only obliquely, as if it were standing on the border. I was acutely aware of this when I was translating my own poems and the poems of other Polish writers into English, or when I was collecting reviews of my anthology of international poetry, *A Book of Luminous Things*, which first appeared in Polish translation. At long last, no history, only contemplation of things that can be seen: distance, a medicine for the world of the will, i.e., of suffering, precisely in accordance with Schopenhauer's prescriptions. But the question remains: Would I have put that book together were that other thing not present in it by its absence? □

—Translated from the Polish by Madeline Levine



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