

POSTWAR POLISH POETRY

# POSTWAR POLISH POETRY

An Anthology  
Selected and Edited by

CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ

Third, Expanded Edition

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS  
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**Czesław Miłosz** was born in Lithuania in 1911. A few years later, his father, an engineer, moved the family to Russia, but after World War I he elected to live in Poland, and Miłosz grew up in Wilno, attending Catholic schools there. At college, like many young Poles of his generation, he joined literary-political groups that were influenced by Marxism. He began to write poetry seriously while he was living in Paris, where he came to know his cousin, a French poet, Oscar de L. Miłosz. During World War II he worked in Warsaw as writer and editor for the Resistance movement publications. In the first postwar years he was secretary at the Polish Embassy in Washington. In 1951 he left Poland and after ten years in Paris came to the United States where he is now Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures, Emeritus, at the University of California, Berkeley. In 1980 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Other books by Czesław Miłosz available from the University of California Press are *The History of Polish Literature*, *Emperor of The Earth* (essays), and *Native Realm* (memoirs).

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PREFACE

TO THE THIRD EDITION

THE first edition of this anthology appeared in 1965. It was soon sold out and followed by a second edition, published in England. Subsequently, I was to learn from friends of mine, American poets who in the sixties had been at the outset of their literary careers, that the book had an impact on their work then. It was well received by teachers and students of literature. All this suggests that its reissue, at the initiative of the University of California Press, is justified.

This is an expanded edition. I have added some poems by authors who were already represented and a few by new names. As I said in my first preface, the anthology is not meant to rank the relative merit of authors by allotting them more or less space. Translatability and the editor's whim were more decisive. That whimsical character of the whole is even more pronounced in this edition, and I readily accept the reproach of arbitrariness.

Postwar Polish poetry has gone through several phases marked by changes in the amount of political control. Censorship was relatively tolerant in the years 1945-1949, sterilizing and debasing between 1949 and 1956, then again relaxed but growing unpredictable through the sixties and seventies. The victory of Solidarity in August 1980 opened, for a short time, completely new vistas. The coup of December 1981 closed that chapter; it is too early to predict the future of poetry, which by its nature is a rebellious force.

In expanding the anthology, I translated several

PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

poems especially for the occasion, and I wish to thank my colleague, poet and professor Leonard Nathan, for his assistance in reading and correcting the new material. I decided also to include some English versions done by others and published in separate collections. Thus, all translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

*Berkeley, 1982*

PREFACE

I wish to explain in a few words why and how I made this anthology. The underlying motive, as I see it, was my distrust of a poetry which indulges in negation and in a sterile anger at the world. Man confronted with mechanisms beyond his control is a loser until he learns that what seemed to crush him was, in fact, a necessary trial to open a new dimension and to prepare his mind to cope with unheard-of circumstances. This, in my opinion, is what has happened in contemporary Polish poetry. A historical steam-roller has gone several times through a country whose geographical location, between Germany and Russia, is not particularly enviable. Yet the poet emerges perhaps more energetic, better prepared to assume tasks assigned to him by the human condition, than is his Western colleague. One can blame the Polish poet for his irony, sometimes verging on cynicism. Irony, however, for better or worse, is an ingredient of modern poetry everywhere and cannot be separated from the purpose it serves. As for this purpose, elegant scepticism and the will to defend the basic values of man's existence are not one and the same thing.

The anthology is not conceived as an 'image' of contemporary Polish poetry. To make such a claim one would have to allot space to every single poet of talent, a task I found impossible. Some, fine craftsmen, are completely untranslatable, whereas others can be translated without betraying the original. I doubt whether Polish syllabo-tonic verse ('feet' within a line of counted syllables) can be rendered in English. Consequently,

there is in my book a distortion of perspective, as poets who use the traditional metre could hardly be included. It is true, however, that in the last decades they have been less and less numerous; the younger generation tends to practise a kind of asceticism or 'anti-poetry'; thus the fluidity of rocking rhythms and rhymes is usually abandoned. Generally speaking, adaptability to English determined to a large extent the number of poems each writer has been allotted.

I limited the scope of the anthology to poets who are living, with one exception. The stress is laid upon poems published since 1956, a date when the lifting of censorship and the breakdown of absurd doctrines provoked a real explosion of new schools and talents. Here, of course, I make several exceptions, going back sometimes as far as the years of World War II or the years preceding it. Poems were judged on merit alone and I did not apply any discrimination as to the views of their authors or their political status. Neither did I examine their passports; no clear-cut division between the poets living abroad and those at home is apparent in Polish literature, in contrast to what occurred in Russian literature. Since Polish poets have been influencing each other across the borders, their present residence is not a decisive factor.

A reader could be puzzled, I would imagine, by the character of this poetry and be curious about its literary kinships. Its mixture of macabre and humorous elements, its preoccupation less with the ego than with dramas of history, the relish with which it handles and remodels moral maxims did not appear all of a sudden in our time; several centuries of native verse, baroque perhaps by the very nature of the language, are behind it. Italian and

French influences, to mention the most significant in the past, were modified accordingly. And as every poetic current is embedded in local traditions even if it absorbs a great deal from abroad, the pattern has been repeated up to this day. Rebellious French writers have exerted a strong influence since the end of the nineteenth century when the first translations of Arthur Rimbaud were published. Yet the work of one patron and martyr of modern Polish verse, Cyprian Norwid (1821-83), has been leading poets in a direction opposite to that of the French. Norwid, slighted and rejected in his lifetime, was a poet of anthropological structures; he confronted the industrial era with the Mediterranean civilizations of the past; the ironic wisdom of that downtrodden man, an emigré in Italy, in New York, in Paris, overcame subjectivism. Today Polish poetry is the result of a distillation of themes and forms, conducted by successive vanguards. Great conciseness is often achieved, and very short poems contain intricate meanings. I must admit I am partial to a poetry that sometimes attains the calligraphic quality of an ideogram. To my surprise I discovered it translates better than long poems, as if the reduction of images and metaphors to a bare minimum made it more universal and less inclined to be trapped in a linguistic laboratory.

Poets of each country resemble an eighteenth-century freemasonic lodge, with its rites, rivalries and friendships. Being a member of such a lodge myself, I am glad to act as its representative abroad. The majority of the authors in the anthology are younger than myself and to introduce them is particularly pleasant. I hope my fellow poets will not hold a grudge against me for not giving

## PREFACE

some of them a more prominent place. Translations should at least be adequate, and it is better not to attempt what cannot be done.

I am not a native English speaker and I do not trust my ear, so I had to rely upon the help and control of those who have spoken English from childhood; poetry, after all, always draws upon the language of one's childhood. I wish to thank Mac Goodman, Lawrence Davis, Reuel Wilson, and Richard Lourie for the long debates we had over one sentence or, quite often, over one word. Two poems of Slonimski and one of Jastrun ('Remembrance') were given definitive shape by Lawrence Davis. Some poems were translated by Peter Dale Scott with my minor assistance and are marked accordingly.

1965

## LEOPOLD STAFF

(1878-1957)

STAFF's name is usually associated with the 'Young Poland' movement which prior to World War I revolutionized Polish poetry. After that time, he accompanied several generations of poets, teaching them craft, but even more learning from them and constantly changing his technique. A man of broad humanist education, he directed before 1914 an excellent series, 'Symposium', for one of the publishing houses, in which, among other authors, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Cardinal Newman appeared. An amusing detail indicative of the syncretic mood of the period is that he himself simultaneously translated Nietzsche and the *Flowers of Saint Francis*. His translations from Latin, Italian, French and German, both in verse and in prose, are a durable achievement. I used to visit him during the last war in Nazi-occupied Warsaw. A gentle old man with a goatee, he was venerated by much younger poets for his passionate interest in their work, his optimism - very necessary at that time - and the poems he sent to underground publications. After 1945 Staff profited considerably from his friendships with very young poets, then entering the literary scene, and, being open to their judgments, attained his long-sought ideal: complete simplicity of form. The poems which follow belong to his last phase. Though he is no longer living, there is no doubt as to his place among the poets of today.



*Mother*

HE dreamed of overturned Gothic cathedrals  
 attacking like drills unconquerable capitals, of  
 buildings which when circled by a car would move  
 off in the streets, of windows on high thrown up  
 along a hundred floors of the air, hoops growing  
 rounder and rounder,  
 of a man-bird with a cloud instead of a parachute,  
 preceded by cyclists pedalling colourful sign-  
 boards,  
 of sudden cataracts of roofs, the clenching of a fist  
 squeezing countries into stone sceptres and golden  
 hammers,  
 of weeping auroras, of spurting fires -  
 Before him stood his mother, a thousand immobile  
 kilometres, covered with distance as with the bark  
 of a roadside willow  
 and the roosters of two contradictory villages crowed  
 noon and evening at once,  
 while  
 on the crossroads signposts trembled with each  
 movement of his hand, jumping back and forth as  
 in a compass shaken  
 and the thick earth, heavy with the dead, resisted the  
 thrusts of his heart.

1937

*On the Shore*

ON the mirror two naked boys wearing enormous fins  
 snorted thin streamlets through noses and mouths,  
 in the midst of the waters they were blowing up an  
 immense glass chalice or a key,  
 seizing a falling oar they stood it, shining, to the flight  
 of dragonflies and bees.  
 On the shore a forester was felling birches with a shot  
 of his gun before his eyeless wife could kneel before  
 him.  
 A pitch burner walked through fir woods conducting  
 behind his thurible, which smelled of myrrh and  
 juniper, compliant swarms migrating from forest  
 nests and from mossy black holes.  
 Nearer, a child herding a path amidst ferns got lost  
 between a beech and its shadow  
 and he alone saw how the first voice changed into a roe  
 and how the flight of a heron turned over the clouds,  
 to show people their skyward gilded top.

1937

*Mother*

HE dreamed of overturned Gothic cathedrals attacking like drills unconquerable capitals, of buildings which when circled by a car would move off in the streets, of windows on high thrown up along a hundred floors of the air, hoops growing rounder and rounder, of a man-bird with a cloud instead of a parachute, preceded by cyclists pedalling colourful signboards, of sudden cataracts of roofs, the clenching of a fist squeezing countries into stone sceptres and golden hammers, of weeping auroras, of spurting fires — Before him stood his mother, a thousand immobile kilometres, covered with distance as with the bark of a roadside willow and the roosters of two contradictory villages crowded noon and evening at once, while on the crossroads signposts trembled with each movement of his hand, jumping back and forth as in a compass shaken and the thick earth, heavy with the dead, resisted the thrusts of his heart.

1937

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1937