

Merton-Milosz, Milosz-Merton
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Merton began a correspondence with the Polish writer Czeslaw Milosz, on 6th December 1958, as a result of reading Milosz's novel, *The Captive Mind*. Milosz had then left Poland and was living in Montgeron, France. Merton had been at Gethsemane for seventeen years, and the great sea-change of looking out into the world from the monastery, was beginning. The correspondence is full of riches, and it is particularly interesting to read both sides of it. Some of the main themes of the letters are the nature of writing, the function of religious literature, and obviously they both commented on each other's work. To choose just one strand from the letters seemed a necessary simplification for the purposes of this short article, so I have selected Milosz's comments on Merton's poems, and Merton's explanations of his own. Merton's side of the correspondence is found in *The Courage of Truth*, selected and edited by Christine Bochen (1993). The Milosz letters are not published but are held in the Merton Archive.

"From time to time I meet your poetry. A few years ago I translated one of your poems for an issue of 'Kultura' dedicated to American literature" wrote Milosz. So Milosz knew of Merton's poems before the correspondence began. In February 1959 Merton sent Milosz *The Tears of the Blind Lions* (1949), saying that "the poems are not good". In fact the volume includes some of Merton's finest poems: *St. Malachy*, *The Quickening of St. John the Baptist*, and the very monastic poem *The Reader*, which is quoted in Monica Furlong's biography. The volume was appreciated by Milosz, particularly for its choral rhythms, for the fact that it had "unity of subject, and not just unity of personality", and because Merton's poetry was based "on a music of death and renewal".

In July 1959 Milosz and Merton were struggling with the place of the ego in poetry, and whether there was a loss of purity of heart in the publishing of poetry. "Literature" said Milosz "belongs to the world and the world is Caesar's". Merton replied, "I still do not share your scruples about writing, though lately I have been thinking of giving it up for a while, and seeking a more severe and solitary kind of existence." The tension between writing and not writing was an ever present one for Merton, but the outcome of the struggle is plain for all to read.

A conscious shift in May 1960 was taking place in Merton's writing. He tells Milosz, "the books of mine you have read belong to the Edenic period in my life, and what is later is more sardonic. I think the last poems will prove that statement, including 'The Elegy for Five Old Ladies'". I read that Elegy as rather a compassionate one, even though Merton imagined it otherwise. Five old ladies in a parked car, without the brake on, glide slowly into a lake and are drowned. I suppose it doesn't have that reverential diction that you might expect for such a subject:

"Let us accordingly pay homage to five now legendary persons, the very chaste daughters of one unlucky ride."

and so could be called, sardonic.

Through 1961 they were discussing the difficulty of finding easy answers to life's questions, and Milosz was describing ways in which he thought the 19th century was more cruel than the 20th, and Merton was still much concerned with the dark night of the soul, "it is better to start with a good acceptance of the dark". In September 1961 Merton sent Milosz some poems including, 'Chant to be used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces', and 'An Elegy for Ernest Hemingway'. Reading the former on the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, I found it almost too sardonic to take. Irony is a strange element in literature and I'm not sure it really does justice, in this case, to the realities of the suffering. But what does? Just previously, Milosz had been quite critical of Merton's Edenic view of nature in 'The Sign of Jonas'. He asked Merton, "what about the dead beetle on the path?" Merton was obviously trying to reduce the sentimental element in his poems, and in its place was giving irony its full force. Of the Auschwitz poem Milosz says, "it comes like a voice from another planet, I look at it through so many poems written in Polish and unknown to the West" (5 October 1961). I take that to be a criticism, as if the poem didn't really ring true for Merton. Merton replies, in January 1962 "I can understand how you would find the Auschwitz poem an exercise of some sort. What else can I do? Yet I think there is no harm in doing even that much." Silence was not a preferred option. The poem on Hemingway, Milosz liked very much, and translated it into Polish.

Early in 1962 Merton sent Milosz 'A Song for the Death of Averroes' (from Ibn Al Arabi, after the Spanish version of Asin Palacios). Milosz found it of great beauty. The rest of 1962 was taken up in the correspondence with Milosz's quite biting criticism of Merton's involvement with peace issues. "I ask myself why you feel such an itch for activity. Is that so that (sic) you are unsatisfied with your having plunged too deep into contemplation, and now you wish to compensate through growing another wing, so to say?" The background to Milosz's stand against Merton's involvement is not the subject of this article, but it is interesting to see this sort of Eastern bloc critique of Merton.

In May 1963 Milosz is reading the poetry of Robinson Jeffers and compares him with Merton: "the reason I am attracted to Jeffers is the same as I am attracted by you. Not poetry per se but an effort to communicate a vision of the universe". Milosz is always asking the big questions and putting literature into its broad political context, as well as demanding "a personal vision". His view of Merton's writings was often coloured by his desire for more apologies, for more reaching out by Merton to the domain of lay literature, less religiosity I suppose, and this view must have influenced the writings of Merton in the 60's. Merton

obviously couldn't do with Robinson Jeffers: "too much of him and too grandiloquent". Merton was reading the Polish poets at this time, particularly Zbigniew Herbert: "your Polish poets fascinate me and I find myself in complete resonance with them, their moods, their irony, their austerity, their simplicity ... it is about what happens."

In September 1964 Milosz, working since 1960 at the University of California, Berkeley, visited Merton at Gethsemane. In December he says he is writing less and less and becoming a dreamer, and if he was to write at all "in this time of universal negation and sneering should not one express admiration?" Merton writes to Milosz in March 1965 to say that he is becoming disillusioned with new movements and groups and says he is not going to sign petitions any more. Then there is a gap in the letters, until a flurry of them in 1968 when Merton was trying to get material for Monks Pond, the anthologies of friends' writing. Merton particularly wanted to print the short prose poems of Zbigniew Herbert. Milosz is conscious that he might have offended Merton by things he said about conservative catholics, and says, "Forgive me. Forgive my stupid and cruel jokes", a situation they might have put right when Merton visited Milosz in San Francisco in October 1968. Merton's final card to Milosz was a sort of poem;

"seen monasteries, temples, lamas, paintings, jungles ..
It was good to see you in SF." (21st November 1968)

