

William Heyen

PIETY AND HOME

In his essay "Religion and Space" Czeslaw Milosz almost seems to lament when he says "Today I cannot deny that in the background of all my thinking there is the image of the 'chain of development'—of gaseous nebulae condensing into liquids and solid bodies, a molecule of life-begetting acid, species, civilizations succeeding each other in turn, segment added to segment, on a scale which reduces me to a particle." He "cannot deny," though it seems that something in him would like to return to his childhood faith, to Mary and Jesus, to the triune God and to the firmament set solidly under his feet, heaven above and hell far below him.

But I must not overstate his loss. Despite the new knowledge, the Movement (a key word in Milosz) of the ages, he has realized that for him, no matter what, "the sacred exists." He says he can *intuit*, in bread on the table or in a rough tree trunk or in a letter opener, depths of being. Relativity has subverted hierarchies, he argues, so that "In his romantic frock coat, standing on a mountaintop, the solitary admirer of his own ego succumbed to panic when faced with his own insignificance beneath the stars. But would that reaction be appropriate now? . . . Movement caused dematerialization and infamous matter, burden of burdens to the faithful, thins into light and whirls into the original '*Fiat lux*' as in the works of those medieval philosophers who interpreted the creation of the world as the transmutation (*transmutatio*) of non-physical, divine light into light which today we would call physical."

Still, if Milosz has been "freed from an image of space as a solid body and container," if Movement has revealed a new dimension in which "all events and actions from all times" persist simultaneously, this does not seem to make him any less lonely. His awe is tinged with melancholy, it seems to me. He is that "particle," and for all his intuitions of the sacred he lives in the existential well, not knowing how he got there, or what he is supposed to be doing there, or whether or not he can ever get out. He does not want to construct religious hierarchies that would leave him feeling superior to anyone else, but as he tries to take comfort in the fact that "Mine, however, is a piety

without a home” and therefore not subject to the deteriorations of our physical home, I feel him painted into his own corner. He has defined poetry as “the passionate pursuit of the real.” He has agreed with Simone Weil that poets can be forgiven everything except proclaiming an inhuman thing, and in his poem “To Robinson Jeffers,” fairly or unfairly to the American poet, he concludes:

Better to carve suns and moons on the joints of crosses as was done in my district. To birches and firs give feminine names. To implore protection against the mute and treacherous might than to proclaim, as you did, an inhuman thing.

But is he not himself proclaiming an inhuman thing, an unearthly piety the logical outgrowth of which would be for us to shrug our shoulders as we lost the earth to pollution or nuclear holocaust? Milosz is a noble and enlightened man, one of the luminous spirits of our time. But he has lost his home. Hard as he fought for it, he has been driven from it by the new science, intellectual cellar by cellar and alley by alley as the ghetto fighters of Warsaw he sees so clearly were driven from their city.

And how could he not have been? After the gas vans and *Einsatzgruppe* and crematoria of our century, it is as though we could not, even if we wanted to, make ourselves believe in an earth and human species that matter to any divine power. How is anything but a homeless piety possible?

I don’t know, but I do know (and almost blush to say it) that my own piety is not homeless. I suppose that I’ve not yet been tested. My world has never been torn apart as has Milosz’s Poland, but even if it had been, I suspect that my childhood experiences of Long Island ponds, those hours of wonder and glory, Long Island’s woods and waters, imprinted me so indelibly that the earth, nature, will always be my home, for better or worse. Reading Milosz, what rises to my memory again and again is the *intellectually* almost unbelievably faithful 44th section of Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself.” Never before or since, perhaps, has piety had, made, realized such a home:

Rise after rise bow the phantoms behind me,
Afar down I see the huge first Nothing, I know I was
even there,

I waited unseen and always, and slept through
the lethargic mist,
And took my time, and took no hurt from the fetid
carbon.

Long I was hugg’d close—long and long.

Immense have been the preparations for me,
Faithful and friendly the arms that have help’d me.

Cycles ferried my cradle, rowing and rowing like
cheerful boatmen,
For room to me stars kept aside in their own rings,
They sent influences to look after what was to hold me.

Before I was born out of my mother generations
guided me,
My embryo has never been torpid, nothing could
overlay it.

For it the nebula cohered to an orb,
The long slow strata piled to rest it on,
Vast vegetables gave it sustenance,
Monstrous sauroids transported it in their mouths
and deposited it with care.

All forces have been steadily employ’d to complete
and delight me,
Now on this spot I stand with my robust soul.

All nature has made his passage a safe one, has conspired to place Walt in his here and now. He is no accident, or accidental particle. He is himself the end of evolution. He is matter that matters, and will. He wrote this before his experiences during the Civil War, but this was his essential faith, and he held to it for the rest of his life. The cradle of creation endlessly rocks us, whatever our transient aberrations as individuals or as a race.

In his essay “On the Effects of the Natural Sciences” Milosz discovers in himself “a deep-rooted conviction of aloneness, mine and

man's, in the face of limitless space, in motion yet empty, from which no voice reaches down speaking a language I can feel and understand."

The doctor who was to weigh it, dropped Walt's brain on the floor. I imagine it, now, made of glass, and raying outward from its burst center in a billion billion particles of material light. Our earth is one. Home for me, for now, is that center.



William J. Vernon

HARD MAPLES

Early, the trees chased me
inside, caught by a windstorm,
spinning seeds into hair, hitting
my eyes, seeking the earth to
lay out their roots, massing
where wind couldn't reach them.

Then I forgot them. But after
a dry spell hexed mowing for
weeks, after rain succored grass
so it grew once again, I saw
what maple trees silently do—

shoots towered on lawns, in
beds around houses, sprang
from the cracking of sidewalks
and gutters, leaped among legs
of my sugar pines. They sang,
straining to make a new forest.