

We have to regain our sense of *being*

Review of

Striving Towards Being: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz

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“We have to get used to our total moral isolation. It is going to get worse. We have to regain our sense of *being*, our confidence in reality, not in words.”
- Merton to Milosz

“I know that the only subject for a philosopher and for a poet is the verb “to be.”
- Milosz to Merton

It is fascinating to listen in on this conversation from the mid-20th century, between two such distinctive minds. Both of them are eminently contemporary, yet neither one of them wholly identified with their time. Much is revealed about our century, about its failures, and about how two very independent thinkers view themselves within it, with their aspirations and failures.

Merton, who grew up in Europe, recovers his European voice, disillusioned with both. Both men are rooted in some form of Catholicism, yet ultimately find themselves to be occupying very different terrain within that tradition. A great mutual respect exists between them, yet sharp differences emerge, and neither meets the expectations of the other, almost willfully so. The frequent twists and reversals of thought are intriguing.

Merton initiated the correspondence after reading *The Captive Mind*, translated into English in 1953. He found it “an important book, which makes most other books on the present state of man look abjectly foolish.” (p. 3) He comes to his correspondent as a Catholic thinker of great integrity and brings his own concerns as a priest and a monk. Milosz in turn had occasional acquaintance with Merton’s poetry in Polish translation. He considered his own book as severely limited in its audience range of concern. It pertained to the ways a writer and an intellectual might relate to a totalitarian society, and illustrates it in the story of four different men, who in differing degrees lose or retain their integrity as thinkers.

Merton was preoccupied with this problem precisely, and addresses such thinkers in *Letter to an Innocent Bystander*, published later in *The Behavior of Titans*. Milosz comments on the article and a quick reading of it is most helpful in following their discussion. Merton in turn shows personal concern and continuing interest in the men described in *Captive Mind*.

Milosz refuses to see himself as the example of integrity Merton looks for in him, and pleads lack of wisdom. “I am uneasy about being an adult and standing alone . . . my independence has been so to say enforced upon me by circumstances.” (p. 21) He has even less confidence in thinkers in Paris who attempt to

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take a “third position” between Stalinism and capitalism. “They are all like that, French intellectuals. They are running around the world looking for a pure, ideal revolution.” (p. 80) He finds their “sneer” a posture, and the cult of alienation “the abominable complexity of neurotics. A trash can.” (p. 152)

But his own Catholicism is of doubtful assurance to him in all this, and he looks to Merton for some creative reformulation. He finds *The Sign of Jonas* falls short. He credits it as changing the monastery from what it was in literature up until then, but he says “what you describe is like a jungle for people who have never seen one.” (p. 60) He pleads for something broader, a view of the world redeemed by Christ, not in the form of abstract theology, but “just on that border between the intellect and our imagination, a border so rarely explored today in religious thinking: we lack an image of the world, ordered by religion . . .” (p. 61)

Perhaps this was one of the spurs that set the direction Merton was taking at the time. The exceptional importance of these letters to him is obvious when read in the context of his collected letters. Milosz in turn confides much about his own ambivalences with his sacramental practice, how confession seems a lie, and the Mass gymnastics.

He feels free, in the company of another poet, to let his imagination run away with him, and evolves a whole scenario where Merton might go on television to condemn its degradation and demand its improvement.

Milosz is much impressed with Louis Bouyer and contemporary theological writing, but he finds his closest affinity with Simone Weil, with her strain of pessimism, her view of nature as a realm of “necessity,” and her empathy with Catharism. This strikes quite a different note than the kind of freedom in nature in solitary places that suffuses Merton’s writing. The two men sink their tap roots below the surface of generic Catholicism into separate continents of spirituality. For Milosz, history is the realm of freedom, for Merton with his apocalyptic streak, history merits skepticism. Both men display equal measures of skepticism and conviction about human possibility, but with a different mix.

Perhaps one of the best expressions ever of Merton’s optimism comes early, and shows what he wanted to bring to this correspondence — a deep hope in the midst of a world that has little to offer:

Milosz — life is on our side. The silence and the Cross, of which we know, are forces that cannot be defeated. In silence and suffering, in the heartbreaking effort to be honest in the midst of dishonesty (most of all our own dishonesty), in all these is victory. It is Christ in us who drives us through darkness to a light of which we have no conception and which can only be found by passing through apparent despair. Everything has to be tested. All relationships have to be tried. All loyalties have to pass through fire. Much has to be lost. Much in us has to be killed, even much that is best in us. But Victory is certain. The Resurrection is the only light, and with that light there is no error. (p. 20)

After his move to Berkeley, Milosz is impressed little with the peace movement, having heard the same rhetoric in pre-war Poland, where it was a tool of Stalinism. The student movements cause him distress as lacking direction, seriousness: “there is a lot of fog around . . . a revolution in a kindergarten.” (p. 165)

In 1964 Milosz visited Merton at Gethsemani, and in 1968 Merton saw Milosz in California. Perhaps the best of their exchange is lost to history. Eventually the correspondence thins out, becomes infrequent as if what needed to be said had been said. But one suspects that with Milosz’ subsequent interest in Buddhism there was some hidden dialogue being continued.