“How Could I Not Think of This?” – Milosz’s Thomistic Challenge to Merton

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This essay will not be about whether Thomas Merton satisfied Czeslaw Milosz’s appeals for a vision of the world in Christ for the twentieth century and beyond. I am not a Merton scholar. I am merely a general reader with a handful of his books under my belt: *The Seven Storey Mountain*, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, *Dialogues with Silence*, some of the poems, and, of course, *Striving towards Being*.[1] Not having read *The Sign of Jonas* also prevents me from passing accurate judgment on how apposite a response Merton’s writing was to the burden Milosz wanted to impose upon it. This also means I cannot comment upon Paul Elie’s declaration in *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage* that Milosz was Merton’s most sensitive critical reader.[2]

All of these important matters are outside my ambit. However, I can shed light upon, contextualize and closely scrutinize Milosz’s two letters from *Striving towards Being* where he talks about the vision of the world in Christ.[3] I will concentrate upon the first letter, because Milosz systematically lays out the bulk of his argument there. I will make brief references to the second letter and some of Milosz’s poetry and prose as needed. Both of these letters, but especially the first one, contain elements that can be straightforwardly identified and comprehended by Milosz scholars. They are not solely the outgrowth of the dialogue with Merton; rather they are the seed of a lifetime of preoccupations clearly in line with the poet’s output both before and after the writing of these letters. Yet the matters they discuss might be too puzzling to piece together for those who are not familiar with the Polish Nobelist’s work. Therefore, this essay will be offered as a gift from a Milosz scholar to Merton scholars to help them better judge whether he met Milosz’s challenge, or even whether the challenge was suitable to Merton’s own concerns.

1. Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz, *Striving towards Being: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz*, ed. Robert Faggen (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997); subsequent references will be cited as “*STB*” parenthetically in the text.

2. See Paul Elie, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003) 261-64.

3. It appears the letters were sent together as Milosz says about the first one: “Centuries. Once I wrote a long letter to you, but did not send it” (*STB* 63).

Milosz is generally not thought of as a religious thinker even by those who are familiar with his work. One could, and should, argue that nearly all his poems, essays and letters circled around one problem. That chief problem of his work is the general breakdown of the religious imagination, specifically in the Catholic tradition. In fact, Milosz's poetry writings are, *avant la lettre*, a continuation of David Tracy's, Andrew Greeley's, and more recently William T. Cavanaugh's working out of the implications of the Catholic sacramental imagination.[4] Milosz fills out a lacuna in the work of these more recent theologians by concentrating upon a long diachronic arc:

> Instead of leaving to theologians their worries, I have constantly meditated on religion. Why? Simply because *someone* had to do this. . . . I lived in a time when a huge change in the contents of the human imagination was occurring. In my lifetime Heaven and Hell disappeared, the belief in life after death was considerably weakened. . . . After 2,000 years in which a huge edifice of creeds and dogmas has been erected, from Origen and Saint Augustine to Thomas Aquinas and Cardinal Newman, when every work of the human mind and of human hands was created within a system of reference, the age of homelessness has dawned. How could I not think of this?[5]

Homelessness is here transposed against a Catholic imagination that gives home to every work of the human mind and hands by putting them within a network of reference. This network of reference is nothing other than the Catholic imagination that places emphasis upon the immanence of God in his creation, upon the analogies between God and the world, through the mediation of Christ in the sacraments and the natural world. Its crisis, especially for those who come from outside of Catholicism, is what led Milosz to burden Merton with the task of building up a vision of the world redeemed in Christ in his letter. As we shall see, the letters show us where the chief cracks lie in the huge edifice of Catholic creeds and dogmas and practices.[6] I would add that the insights we will explore in what follows ought to place Milosz in the pantheon of great twentieth-century theologians. The recognition will probably be a long

4. See David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981); Andrew M. Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); William T. Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination* (New York: T & T Clark, 2002).

5. Czeslaw Milosz, *Roadside Dog*, trans. Robert Hass and Czeslaw Milosz (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998) 105.

6. These interdependent factors are crucial because they outline what is important in this life by building up a credible picture of what happens in the hereafter.

time in coming, but it will come, just as Coleridge scholarship has finally caught up with his highly innovative religious thinking.[7]

Milosz's first letter is a greatly compressed catalog of the cracks in the edifice of the Catholic imagination. The poet's reading of them in his correspondence with Merton concentrates upon nature as the place where they can be most clearly felt. Before we delve into them it might be helpful to see how Milosz envisions a fully Catholic picture of the world. We get a glimpse of such a picture in his late poem "Presence."[8] In it he attempts to name a mysterious presence that marked everything in his early life in rural Lithuania:

> But I grew up in a Catholic family, and so my surroundings were soon teeming with devils, but also with the saints of the Lord.
>
> Yet in truth I felt their Presence, all of them, gods and demons,
>
> As if rising within one enormous unknowable Being.

The "but" is crucial in this passage, because until these last stanzas of the poem the presence remains unnamed. It is only Milosz's Catholic upbringing, which instilled in the Polish writer a specifically Catholic imagination, that allows him to name the overarching presence as Being-itself (*ipsum esse*) with attendant saints and demons.[9] Given a different vision of the world the name for this experience might be different, or the presence might remain unnamed, even unattended to (as it does in modernity, according to Milosz).

Milosz grew up in the countryside of Lithuania. It was a place mostly untouched by modern progress and technology.[10] The rhythms of life were governed by the passing of the seasons and the liturgical calendar. In some ways a system of reference shaped by a Catholic sacramental imagination was inevitable for someone with his background. It stands in stark contrast with the picture Milosz paints of the contemporary world where

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7. See Luke S. H. Wright, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Anglican Church* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010); see also Douglas Hedley, *Coleridge, Philosophy and Religion: Aids to Reflection and the Mirror of the Spirit* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

8. Czeslaw Milosz, *Selected and Last Poems: 1931-2004*, trans. Anthony Milosz et al. (New York: Ecco, 2011) 273; subsequent references will be cited as "Milosz, *Selected Poems*" parenthetically in the text.

9. The intentionally oblique reference to Aquinas here will become clearer and slightly less mysterious toward the end of this essay. It is enough to note it for now.

10. See: Czeslaw Milosz, *Native Realm: A Search for Self-Definition*, trans. Catherine S. Leach (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), especially the first two chapters, "Place of Birth" and "Ancestry" (1-35).

such a state cannot be taken for granted not only for non-Catholics, but also for most Catholics. This dilemma lies at the core of the passage that is the focus of the essays in this volume. The reason why there is a need for a "vision of the world redeemed by Christ" comes from inhabiting "a period when the image accepted by [the] majority is clear: empty Sky, no pity, stone wasteland, life ended by death" (*STB* 62) is the baseline belief. Such a baseline belief is the polar opposite of the vision of redemption in Christ for which Milosz longs.

Milosz's description of the modern worldview suspends the sustaining presence of Being (*ipsum esse*)[11] with an all-pervading absence; it suspends eternal life with the pervasiveness of death; it suspends salvation with quasi-damnation; and so on. If there is any presence in this alternative vision of the world then it is the constant presence of absence and privation of being.[12] In fact, it is not entirely a non-metaphysical vision, because a world cut off from transcendence is equivalent to a hell on earth. In effect, one might suggest that the three-tiered world did not entirely fall apart; instead it has collapsed into the basement of Hieronymus Bosch's vision of an earthly hell.[13]

The hellish inescapability of this condition was classically captured by Baudelaire in his poem "The Lid," where he compares the Earth to a cauldron covered with an airtight lid and its human inhabitants cooking in their own rage with no avenue of escape. We can see this pattern continuing in the writings of Milosz's friend Camus, other existentialists, and even later (post-modern) writers such as Samuel Becket, Philip Larkin, Don DeLillo and David Foster Wallace.[14] In his poem "To Robinson Jeffers" Milosz singled out the poetry of Jeffers as a distillation of this modern system of reference. Note how the words here repeat almost verbatim the formulation from *Striving towards Being*, but in a poetic idiom:

> All your life listening to the ocean. Black dinosaurs
> wade where a purple zone of phosphorescent weeds
> rises and falls on the waves as in a dream. And Agamemnon
> sails the boiling deep to the steps of the palace
> to have his blood gush onto marble. Till mankind passes
> and the pure and stony earth is pounded by the ocean.

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11. Notably, the name Aquinas deemed most appropriate for God in his *Summa*.

12. There are perhaps some analogues here with the classical definition of evil as *privatio boni*.

13. Milosz frequently alluded to Bosch in his prose and verse.

14. Therefore, it is not incidental that Milosz calls Camus' *The Fall* "a cry of despair and a treatise on Grace (absent)" (*STB* 65). Also, let's not forget the hellish visions of modernists such as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound *et al*.

Thin-lipped, blue-eyed, without grace or hope,
before God the Terrible, body of the world.
Prayers are not heard. Basalt and granite.
Above them, a bird of prey. The only beauty.
(Milosz, *Selected Poems* 94)

Milosz therefore interprets a pure Darwinistic naturalism, where immanence and death rule all – a crypto-theology. And so his letter to Merton could be read not only as a call to rebuild the "contents of [the Catholic] faith," but to present that vision of the world in Christ as an alternative to a cruel divinization of the world as ruled by death, an alternative to the default naturalistic theology of our times (see *STB* 60).

The letter can also be better understood if we explore a little bit of Milosz's other theological preoccupation: the genealogy of the crypto-theology of immanent naturalism. He objects to Merton backing Pasternak's view of nature, because it is too romanticized and does not absorb enough of the developments in philosophy and the natural sciences since the Reformation.[15] For Milosz, Merton seems to sidestep Darwin: "nature in your book is contaminating, one is under its spell, but it is a background, nature is spiritualized and I waited for a moment when you meet her not only in its beauty or calm but also in its immutability of law: a dead beetle in your path. In other words, less macrocosm, more microcosm" (*STB* 61). Darwin's theories, at least as understood by Milosz, crush the individual (microcosm) at the expense of the survival and flourishing of the species and the survival of the world (collective, macrocosm, background). In his late extended poem "A Treatise on Theology" Milosz goes as far as calling natural selection the theology of the Prince of This World, consequently an inversion of the gospel message of mercy, since it represents "the triumph of the strong and the defeat of the weak."[16] In the end Darwin's beard shows from behind the corpse of the dead beetle sacrificed for the advancement of the species.[17]

15. Romanticism had a much more profound and longstanding influence (some say the period has not ended) in Poland than in other countries. Milosz spent a great deal of effort either fighting off or reshaping the legacy of Romanticism in Poland. As a result, he got involved in a lot of vociferous debates upon this very topic. Milosz was also greatly attracted to the natural sciences during his high school studies. His mature writings simultaneously violently resist the misshapen scientistic picture of the world and the inability to ignore the serious challenges posed to the Catholic imagination by a purely immanentist philosophy based upon and coupled with a refusal to ignore the real challenges posed by it to a Catholic panentheistic vision of the world.

16. Czeslaw Milosz, *Second Space*, trans. Czeslaw Milosz and Robert Hass (New York: Ecco, 2004) 51.

17. The senseless suffering of beetles, as a symbol, so far as I know unique in world

Yet, the letter that immediately follows the one we have concentrated upon shows that Milosz was aware that the shifts in the Western imagination go much further back than the nineteenth century. Darwin and the new anti-sacramental view of nature and the concomitant marooning of humanity is the result of changes that date back to the partial collapse of medieval Christianity: "I do not know to what extent a sort of despair at the sight of ruthless necessity in Nature is justified. Yet it exists while it was not known until quite modern times. The distance between man and the rest of Creation was so great that for Descartes too the animal was a machine. Some old Manichaean elements started to revive perhaps in the Reformation but they were mitigated" (*STB* 64). The separation of man from the rest of creation (now seen as a machine, something like a heartless meat-grinder) can only be devastating for a Catholic imagination whose raison d'être is a vision of Christ in all. Milosz expands on how the Reformation helped to bring this about in one of his poems from his middle period (only to develop the notion more in other places[18]). He starts "I Sleep a Lot" with the following two unpresupposing and rather comical lines: "I sleep a lot and read St. Thomas Aquinas / or *The Death of God* (that's a Protestant book)" (Milosz, *Selected Poems* 73). This is significant, because the Death-of-God movement billed itself as the main inheritor of the Reformation by rejecting all forms of Catholic mediation of transcendence through a radical dialectics – up to the point of rejecting transcendence altogether.

In the end, emphasizing the transcendence of God too much can lead, as it in fact did in history, to an eventual severing of ties between this world and God, thereby opening up the door to exclusively immanent readings of the world in theories such as Darwinism.[19] The unintended consequence of the Reformation is that highest God can become so high that he will abandon things down here below to cruelty and decay. Milosz believes these are the ultimate consequences of picturing the world as a machine. So much so that in a very important parenthetical comment in

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literature, for the problem of evil, is an image Milosz and his friend the atheist novelist Witold Gombrowicz frequently feature.

18. See especially Czeslaw Milosz, *The Land of Ulro*, trans. Louis Iribarne (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985) and Czeslaw Milosz, *Visions from San Francisco Bay*, trans. Richard Lourie (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983).

19. To his detriment Milosz only concentrated upon the destructive readings of Darwinism. More recent theological thinking has developed the reading of Darwin to show how it is possible to read evolution in terms of mutual support and group flourishing; see especially Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001) and Conor Cunningham, *Darwin's Pious Idea* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010).

the second letter he equates one of the main doctrines of the Reformers with recent developments in the natural sciences: "The most terrifying is perhaps not the change to which we are subjected but the lack of change, a basic identity of our nature through the time, predestination (biology, genetics is my real terror)" (*STB* 67). Predestination is like the laws of biology because it kills the dramatic biblical frame that puts the immanent sphere in constant dynamic contact with transcendence. Salvation ought to have the shape of an imaginative narrative. Milosz suggests this when he says: "I waited for some answers to many theological questions but answers not abstract as in a theological treatise, 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, while [the] Middle Ages had such an image" (*STB* 61). How then might Milosz's own vision of the contemporary world ordered by the religion of Christ look like?

In fact, it bears some resemblance to the medieval frame. The hint to this puzzle is contained in the valediction to the first letter. Milosz closes it with, "I am glad that you exist" (*STB* 63). The valediction, when read in terms of Milosz's whole output, suggests the ultimacy of incarnate existence. We might remember that Aquinas thought *ipsum esse* the most adequate name for God. So it's not surprising that in the prose-poem "*Esse*"[20] Milosz harps upon this Thomistic trope:

> I looked at that face, dumbfounded. The lights of métro stations flew by; I didn't notice them. What can be done, if our sight lacks absolute power to devour objects ecstatically, in an instant, leaving nothing more than the void of an ideal form, a sign like a hieroglyph simplified from the drawing of an animal or bird? A slightly snub nose, a high brow with sleekly brushed-back hair, the line of the chin – but why isn't the power of sight absolute? – and in a whiteness tinged with pink two sculpted holes, containing a dark, lustrous lava. To absorb that face but to have it simultaneously against the background of all spring boughs, walls, waves, in its weeping, its laughter, moving it back fifteen years, or ahead thirty. To have. It is not even a desire. Like a butterfly, a fish, the stem of a plant, only more mysterious. And so it befell me that after so many attempts at naming the world, I am able only to repeat, harping on one string, the highest, the unique avowal beyond which no power can attain: I am, she is. Shout, blow the trumpets, make thousands-strong marches, leap, rend your clothing, repeating only: is!

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20. The title is italicized in the original to highlight a technical use in the poem.

> She got out at Raspail. I was left behind with the immensity of existing things. A sponge, suffering because it cannot saturate itself; a river, suffering because reflections of clouds and trees are not clouds and trees. (Milosz, *Selected Poems* 51)

Only by citing the whole poem can we get the meaning of this poem. The rapid-fire cadence and the packing together of the free verse demonstrate the density Milosz senses in being. The density is so intense that it outpaces and saturates the ability of reason to absorb it.[21]

While Milosz was in all likelihood sincere when he said to Merton, "I beg you, do not interpret this as an attempt to convince you to become a theologian in the Dominican tradition" (*STB* 62), his own poetry gravitated toward that tradition of thought. He transposed it into a contemporary poetic idiom. This commitment is one of the reasons why he was so critical of some extreme versions of Darwinism for making nature into nothing but a gaping jaw, but also of endeavors to ignore Darwinism's implications through romanticizing nature. In the final analysis, I would claim Milosz did not find a happy middle place between these two extremes in his prose and poetry. He struggled with them until the end. These two letters to Merton were an attempt to probe the monk for answers the poet sought himself. These answers are fundamental to the issue of "how one believes, what are the contents of faith, in any case those translatable into notions and images" (*STB* 60), that is, toward reconstructing a vision of Christ *in the world*. All of these factors also shed light why the title *Striving towards Being* was so appropriate for this collection of letters – at least for Milosz scholars. I wonder to what extent scholars see Merton, in the totality of his output, obsessively puzzling over these same questions surrounding the collapse of the Catholic imagination and the potential of retrieving the Thomistic heritage of *ipsum esse* after Darwin.

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21. There are some similarities here with the work of Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies in Saturated Phenomena* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004).