

Czesław Miłosz

“*What is poetry which does not save nations or people?*”

These lines from the poem *Dedication*, written by Czesław Miłosz in Warsaw in 1945, express his faith in the power of poetry. This faith was hard-won from the conflicts of a life that was at times dangerous and turbulent, and full of political and moral dilemmas. Born in what is now Lithuania in 1911, his early life was full of upheavals during the First World War, and his family ended up in Wilno, Poland, where he studied law.

In 1931 he went to Paris on a fellowship, was part of a group of young poets, and published his first book of poetry. On his return, he worked as a commentator for Radio Wilno, but was dismissed, probably because of his perceived left-wing views.

He was in Nazi-controlled Warsaw in the Second World War and took part in underground activities, experiencing the horrors of that time, and risking his life helping Jews to escape. For this he was later honoured at Yad Veshem, Israel’s memorial to victims of the Holocaust, as one of ‘The Righteous among the Nations’.

After working as a cultural attaché for the new People’s Republic of Poland in the US and Paris, Miłosz eventually found political asylum in France, where he wrote much poetry and *The Captive Mind* (1) – a book about the terrible effects of a totalitarian regime on intellectuals.

He emigrated to the United States in 1960, and became Professor of Slavic Languages and Literature at the University of California at Berkeley. He received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1980. He returned to Poland in 2000, where he died in 2004 and was honoured in a state funeral.

In his poetry Miłosz managed to express both the sublime and sensuous beauty of the world, and the terrible truths about human history with its cruelties and oppressions. In his life he refused the polarities of political left or right, and had a deeply religious consciousness while feeling the issues of a secular age.

Seamus Heaney, who did much to draw attention to Miłosz’s poetry, wrote of him as a poet ‘tested by dangerous times’, and about his ‘fierce conviction about the holy force of his art, how poetry was called upon to combat death and nothingness.’(2)

Barbara Vellacott

1) Czesław Miłosz *The Captive Mind* (Penguin, 2001)

2) Seamus Heaney in ‘The Door Stands Open’; the foreword to ‘*Czesław Miłosz – Selected and Last Poems*’ (Harper Collins, 2011)

See also Seamus Heaney, ‘In Gratitude to All the Gifts’ in *The Guardian*, 11 September 2004. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/sep/11/featuresreviews.guardianreview25>

