

Job and Forrest Gump

CLARE CAVANAGH

My life story [is] the triumph of foolish Jan over his wiser brothers.

—Czesław Miłosz, *A Year of the Hunter*

Why not concede that I have not progressed, in my religion,
past the Book of Job?

With the one difference that Job thought of himself as innocent
and I saw guilt in my genes.

I was not innocent; I wanted to be innocent, but I couldn't be.

—Czesław Miłosz, "Treatise on Theology"

In the summer of 2002, I conducted a series of interviews with Miłosz in preparation for a biography I was just beginning. Miłosz's attitude toward the project was, perhaps inevitably, mixed. He had given me his blessing, but he worried nonetheless about the shape his life would take in the hands of a young (at least by his standards) Slavist from California, that is to say, the Land of Ulro. I called him as soon as I got into Kraków. We said our hellos, but his next remark was a shocker. "I must convince you not to write the biography," he told me. My heart stopped. "I can't, I've already spent my advance!" I yelled. (This wasn't entirely true, but I was damned if I was taking that line off my vita without a fight.) "Then you must make it a comedy," he replied. "It's the story of Forrest Gump."

I'd handed him just the set-up he'd been looking for, and he roared at his own joke.

I did not first meet Miłosz in California, where I grew up and went to college just a couple of hours from the famous house on Grizzly Peak Boulevard in Berkeley, or at Harvard, where I attended his Norton lectures as a graduate student in the early eighties. We were in the same room several times at various gatherings in Cambridge, but I couldn't bring myself to ask him to sign my *Wiersze wybrane*, the selected works, which I had just begun to read in Polish.¹ The Nobel Prize, the famous bristling eyebrows, and, above all, the poems: it was too much for an awestruck would-be Slavist to tackle. (I was likewise shy of approaching even the pre-Nobel Seamus Heaney, whom I would pass every so often on the way to class.)

I learned only later that even Nobel Prize-winning poets rarely minded being waylaid by overly enthusiastic students. Miłosz would glow whenever I passed on the reactions of my undergrads or grads, the alumni and retirees for whom I occasionally lecture at Northwestern, or the miscellaneous Miłosz fans whom I encountered on a fairly regular basis. I remember telling him about the grad student who jumped up and down squealing as if she'd seen Elvis when I gave her the copy of *Second Space* he'd autographed for her, and the two successive administrative assistants at Northwestern Gender Studies—both nice, smart, gay artists (God knows how many fans have yet to come out of the closet, I told him)—who had wanted to meet me just because I knew Czesław Miłosz. The response was the same every time. He would beam, turn pink, and say, “*Nie może być, nie może być*” (You don't say, you don't say). It was like giving a kid a bicycle for Christmas. The reactions keep coming—the student who cries watching a film of Miłosz reading, the yoga teacher who reads Miłosz to her meditating students. I wish he were there to tell.

From the start we spoke, I should mention, in a macaronic mix of Polish and English. I followed his lead, of course—what else do you do with Czesław Miłosz?—and he switched languages unpredictably. The subject, his mood, his health, how friendly he was feeling that particular day, hour, or minute: we could go back and forth a dozen times in the course of an afternoon. Sometimes we even did Russian: he recited Osip Mandelstam's poem “Lamarck” for me from memory one day, with obvious relish. Or sometimes I would switch from English to Polish because I found it easier to ask what Wisława Szymborska calls “the most pressing questions are naïve ones” in a language I know less well than my own.² If you don't feel smart enough even in English—and around Miłosz that could happen in any language—you might as well give up on sophistication and

subordinate clauses and get straight to the point in Polish. He was infinitely patient, I should add, though, with nonnative speakers. As is true of so many Poles, he was delighted that a non-Pole had taken the pains to learn their impossible language. (I call them the anti-French.)

I'd missed my chances in Cambridge and California. I first met Miłosz only years later in Kraków, after I'd already earned my spurs as a Slavist and a translator. But even so, it was touch and go. The poet Bronisław Maj, whom Miłosz admired and had translated, told me over and over just to give Miłosz a call when I got into town. But it seemed presumptuous, like calling Goethe to ask if I could stop by for coffee. So before I went over in the summer of 2000, I finally sent him and Carol a cautious e-mail asking if they might possibly find time for me during my next visit. I still have the e-mail they wrote back. I never got over the shock of finding that address in my inbox; I miss it now. When I finally visited, he was in grand form, and I took to Carol immediately. ("When I met Carol, I said to myself, 'He really is a smart guy,'" I told him after she died. "But she picked him," his assistant, Agnieszka Kosińska, objected. "But he let himself get picked," I replied. He beamed.) I'd dressed up for the occasion but was taken aback when Czesław began to admire my feet. No one has ever admired my feet, and with good reason. "Are they really so perfect?" he asked. Weakening eyesight and the this-worldly inclinations of the planet's most unlikely Manichaeian work wonders on the unpedicured. I was taken aback—what on earth do you say?—but Carol saved me. "He wants to know if you're wearing stockings," she explained. I was.

This was Miłosz in his Gumpian mode, the Miłosz of the unexpected, unearned (so he thought) happy ending. He'd found a wonderfully smart unpretentious wife who looked after him and his interests with both intelligence and joy. He'd returned part time to Poland after decades of exile. He had his lovely, large Kraków apartment—"you could roller skate across it," he boasted—and the house on Grizzly Peak. He was lionized in both his native and his adoptive land (though Poland and the returning prophet treated one another with suspicion as well as warmth). We moved on to topics that were more literary. Miłosz and Robert Hass were just then working on his volume *To (This)*, and Carol wondered how the title's demonstrative pronoun should be translated. She didn't know much Polish, but she'd sensed the problem. "'That' is too far away, but is 'this' too close?" she asked, pointing. "You think like a translator," I said. Or at least like this translator; I spend a lot of time behind closed doors waving my arms and trying to figure out just how near or far the words should be from wherever I happen to be sitting.

Then she went off on other business, and Miłosz and I talked about many things: Polish poetry, poetry in English, Polish literature in translation, the “Miłosz school” and the “Barańczak school” of American translators, that is, the generations of Slavic graduate students who’d fallen under the influence of one poet or the other. I belong to the second camp, but he didn’t hold it against me. We got on to Philip Larkin, whom he loathed. I tried to defend Larkin, but since Miłosz liked me, he decided I agreed with him, anyway. This went on for an hour or so, and when we’d finished, Miłosz turned to me and said, “Good shop talk.” Good shop talk with Czesław Miłosz!

Miłosz had left me a message when I got back later that day to the friends’ house where I was staying. He wanted to do an interview with me (a phone call from Czesław Miłosz! an interview with Czesław Miłosz!) and asked me to call back. So I summoned up my nerve and called. Carol answered the phone. “I’m sure he’d love to talk,” she said, “but he and [his friend, the American Slavist] Alexander Schenker have just put away a bottle of Scotch between them, and I doubt you’ll get much out of him.” I asked when I should call back. She said around nine the next morning. So I called the next day at nine, and there he was, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed so far as I could tell. I couldn’t have done it in college, let alone at eighty-nine.

But why should Miłosz want to interview me, and not vice versa? My Irish surname and American street address give me a peculiar advantage in Poland; I translate and teach Polish literature by choice and not by virtue of genealogical and patriotic obligations. Miłosz wanted me to help prove to his mistrustful countrymen that they were not, in Słowacki’s phrase, simply the “parrot of nations,” endlessly imitating the literary fashions of the West.³ What he had long called “the Polish school of poetry”—by which he meant the great Polish poets of postwar Poland (Zbigniew Herbert, Tadeusz Różewicz, Miron Białoszewski, Wisława Szymborska, and others), whom he’d worked to promote from his earliest years in American exile—was neither a compensatory figment of his poetic imagination nor a self-serving device designed to exaggerate his importance in the eyes of doubtful compatriots. As an Irish American Slavist from California, I could say what I knew to be true from my own experience without risking accusations of self-aggrandizement or defensiveness: that Eastern European poetry, with Poland arguably occupying pride of place, has held for decades now a privileged position in Anglo-American and Anglo-Irish writing alike. The interview was in fact called “The Polish School of Poetry” when it appeared in the Polish daily paper *Rzeczpospolita* (The Republic) early in 2001. The irony of Miłosz’s using me to establish his

credentials as a bona fide founding member of the “Polish school” didn’t escape me. I still had no clue, though, as to how problematic his status as the Polish poet par excellence was among some of his own countrymen. I never would have guessed it from seeing the headlines, fireworks, and festivities that accompanied his ninetieth birthday in Kraków later that year or from reading the interviews with Carol in the Polish equivalents of *Elle* and *Cosmopolitan* (nice work if you can get it). I didn’t realize that I’d already become for some Polish poets and critics what I am still, unapologetically, today: a Miłosz apologist. I didn’t know back then that there was anything to apologize for. Now I know. In Poland, Miłosz has been taken to task for many sins: his rejection of rabid nationalism; his resolutely complex, decidedly non-Polish form of Catholicism (he loathed the notion that “Polish” and “Catholic” were virtual synonyms); his early affiliation with the Polish Communist Party; and perhaps above all, his enormous international fame. Many younger poets particularly—and who wasn’t younger than Miłosz?—found living in the shadow of the Great Man intolerable.

And that brings us to the Jobian side of the equation. In July 2002, I was already at work on the biography and stopped by the apartment at Bogusławskiego 6 as often as I thought was decent. (Miłosz would ask my friends, “Why doesn’t Clare call?” when I tried to keep from pestering him. What could I say? Because he’s Czesław Miłosz, and he’s great, and I don’t have a clue what a biographer is supposed to do with a nonagenarian living legend.) Carol wasn’t at home. She’d been ill for several months with an as-yet-undiagnosed ailment and was being treated, I believe, in California then. Czesław said at least they knew it wasn’t cancer. I was interviewing him—on literature, on his Lithuanian ancestors, on whatever he wanted to talk about—when he got the phone call telling him that it was cancer after all. “I think we will not talk any more about literature today,” he said, and he didn’t look like the great, rather fearsome Czesław Miłosz then, just the oldest, saddest man in the world. I asked if I could hug him, and he said yes, so I did, and after that he said, “We are friends, ya? We are friends?” And he gave me a present, a photo album called *Serdce Litwy* (Heart of Lithuania), for which he’d written the text; it’s signed and dated “July 26, 2002.” Carol died a few weeks later. He called me from California to tell me, and I didn’t know what to say, and he couldn’t hear me when I did speak. Even if I had said the right thing, I hadn’t said it loud enough.

This was the anti-Gump, the poet whose loved ones pay for his art, for his success, for his survival: and he pays too, by losing them time and again. This is where the “child of good fortune” meets Job, as Miłosz writes in

Second Space, which ends, in the Polish version, with a valedictory for his “ridiculous / Contradictory life.”⁴

While Carol was still alive, we kept up an e-mail correspondence, albeit rather one-sided. I would write him about the Miłosz enthusiasts among my students and my *emerici*, the retirees I taught in my alumni classes, or the kid who slept in the front row at my lectures until we got to “A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto,” which woke her up for the rest of the course. Or I would write him about whatever Miłosz work I happened to be reading at the time, and he would send back preemptive warnings: “Remember, *The Issa Valley* is not autobiography!” “Remember I am a poet, not a politician!” (This was vis-à-vis *The Captive Mind* and Miłosz among the pro-Soviet French intellectuals in the 1950s: “The worst decade of my life,” he told me.) My favorite e-mail came, though, early in 2002 when I’d been complaining about having to serve as department chair in the coming academic year. “I sympathize out of sincere friendship for you,” he wrote in Polish. “I spent thirty years at Berkeley pretending to be the village idiot so that I wouldn’t have to chair.” Miłosz the village idiot. Yes, and George W. discovered quantum physics. I wrote back that I’d tried that tack, too, but the competition in my department was too stiff. This wasn’t entirely fair, but I wanted to make him laugh. Anyone who has heard his laugh will understand.

After Carol died, he stopped writing back—his health, his eyesight, his spirits didn’t permit. But I kept writing and visiting. Writing was the easy part—all I had to do was to pick up one of the books, and I would want to go online immediately. It took me a few years to get over the urge to write to him every time I read his words. And I had a never-ending supply of Miłosz jokes for him, because my precocious son—he was seven or eight at the time—never stopped making fun of my obsession with “your poet-friend, Czesław Miłosz.” I would repeat them whenever I went to visit, and Miłosz roared every time. My son, Martin, was, and is, obsessed with politics, and out of superhuman motherly devotion I watched a State of the Union address with him one night. When I started criticizing Bush after the talk—what’s a mother to do?—he said, “So who do you want for president, Czesław Miłosz?” I was driving Martin to school sometime in 2003 when he decided to quiz me on presidential history. He asked me who’d been the youngest president ever elected. I said, “JFK.” He said, “No, he was the youngest president ever inaugurated, Teddy Roosevelt was the youngest one ever elected.” Or maybe it was the other way around. In any case, I got it wrong. The next question was easier, though: “If Kennedy was alive today, who would be older, him or Czesław Miłosz?” Miłosz loved that one.

His favorite story, though—he told it to friends who told it back to me—was when Martin and his friend Teddy went with me to the local Barnes and Noble. Martin took Teddy straight to the poetry shelves, showed him the *Collected Poems*, and said, “My mom knows that guy.” (I don’t remember whether Teddy was impressed.) And then Agnieszka Kosińska would tell about her own son yelling when she got home, “*Mamo, jakiś Miłosz do Ciebie dzwonił*” (Mom, some Miłosz guy called you). I doubt that Amazon.com had in mind the happiness of aged Polish poets when it started the practice some years back of listing in their searches not just the author’s works but all the American books in print that cite him. One time I carefully printed out almost all of the then-eight-hundred-plus references to Miłosz in everything from self-help manuals to foreign policy studies to give him when I visited. (My printer gave out before it reached the end, which thrilled him.) He read them all, along with the many four-star reviews that his readers had given his books on Amazon. And he read every word, good or bad, that came out about him in the Polish press. But more on that later.

The visiting got more difficult. I knew he had black moods when Carol was alive, but Carol was famous among his friends for driving them away. But I really saw the doubts, the moods, and the black sides—he could give Jehovah a run for the money when it came to striking terror—only after Carol died. Sometimes it would be yet another younger poet attacking him; “He called me ‘Moscow’s dancing bear,’” I remember Miłosz saying bleakly about one young writer. The attacks came on a fairly regular basis, and he took them all to heart. I suppose this was the reverse side of the childlike joy at every compliment. I once gave a Kraków cabdriver Miłosz’s street address—I never mentioned his name—and he recognized it right away. “Are you going to visit Czesław Miłosz? Please give him the best regards of the cabdriver in the red Mercedes,” he requested. Miłosz beamed.

Sometimes the doubts ran deeper—his life, his poetry, his soul. And sometimes the doubts were about me: “You will produce not my life, but only some facsimile,” he said with a scowl in the summer of 2003. He spent several weeks that summer putting me through the biographer’s equivalent of boot camp. I’d come armed daily with the best questions I could muster, written with the help of a small army of poets, professors, and Miłosz specialists. And every day he gave the same response: “*Takie oczywiste pytania*” (Such obvious questions). Then he would invite me for another session the next day, when yet another set of questions would be dismissed and after an excruciating hour or two, I would be sent home to

think up some “questions no one’s asked me yet.” Questions no one has ever asked Miłosz. It was like Rumpelstiltskin in Polish, but worse.

Finally, after a sleepless night spent reading and rereading *Druga przestrzeń* (the then-untranslated *Second Space*), I went in and asked about the poems and about religion. Those were the questions he wanted. And that was what I’d wanted to talk about, too, but I’d thought biographers were supposed to do something different. We talked about “Father Seweryn” and “The Treatise on Theology”—I said I’d been surprised by the Virgin at the end, and he laughed and said, “I was, too.” He asked me to turn the tape recorder off, and he talked about Carol’s Southern Baptist childhood, and Catholicism, and the mass, and the afterlife. I can’t yet bring myself to repeat everything he said about Carol and the afterlife—maybe I am a bad biographer after all, but it feels like violating a friend’s confidence. A Polish friend of mine, not raised as I was in the church, insists that Miłosz was an orthodox Catholic at the end. He wasn’t. He was a practicing Catholic, though, which is something very different. He watched mass every day on the television when he couldn’t attend. He disagreed with the church on some things—birth control for one—and had nagging doubts about others. There was no prototype for the priestly speaker in “Father Seweryn,” he told me; he’d simply imagined that some priest out there must be tormented by the same seesaw of disbelief and faith, or at least the hope of faith, that he himself experienced almost daily.

And I told him that he’d helped me to return to the church after a fashion, because if he could call himself a Catholic, then what the hell, I could too. We called ourselves the “confused Catholics.” Once, earlier, when I’d visited, Miłosz had asked, in one of his black moods, “Why do I still have so many doubts at my age?” “If you didn’t have doubts, I wouldn’t have any use for you,” I told him. And it’s true. I’m so grateful for his doubts.

“I didn’t deserve such an old age,” he told friends not long before he died. When I last visited him, in July 2004, he wasn’t talking much. I saw him first in the hospital; later, when he’d gone back home to Bogusławskiego 6, he asked me over to say goodbye. I meant to send him an e-mail when I got back to the States; I had a good joke for him. The priest at my church was chewing out the parish parents for letting their daughters come to mass in shorts and tank tops. “When I’m saying ‘Body of Christ,’ I don’t want to be thinking, ‘Christ, what a body!’” he bellowed. That would have been something for Miłosz.

Notes

1. Czesław Miłosz, *Wiersze wybrane* (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1980).

2. "The Century's Decline," *Poems, New and Collected, 1957–1997*, trans. Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh (New York: Harcourt Brace, 2000), 198–99.
3. Juliusz Słowacki, *Grob Agamemmona* (1840), as quoted in *Skrzydlate słowa*, ed. Henryk Markiewicz and Andrzej Romanowski (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1990), 621.
4. Czesław Miłosz, *Druga przestrzeń* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2002), 115.