

CZESLAW
MILOSZ



New and
Collected Poems
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ecco

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A T R E A T I S E
O N P O E T R Y

(Traktat poetycki)

1 9 5 7

ODE

O October

*You are my true delight,
Month of the cranberry and the red of the maple,
Of Hudson Bay geese a-wing in the transparent air,
Dry vines and withering grasses and smoky light,
Oh October*

O October

*The silence of roads in a carpet of pine needles,
A birdcall fashioned from an owl's wing,
The wailing of dogs on the scent of a buck,
And the startled peal of a bird in the spruces,
Oh October*

O October

*Shine of frost on the blade of a sword
When a Polish engineer glimpses near West Point
In the vivid woods the maple-red coats of British soldiers
Moving soundlessly up the Appalachian trail,
Oh October*

O October

*Cold is your crystal wine,
Tart is the taste of your lips above a necklace of rowanberries,
Your panting sides are the color
Of the fallow hair of a mountain deer,
Oh October*

O October

*Pouring dew on the rusty traces,
Blowing a buffalo horn above the rebel camp,
Burning bare feet on the sloping hill paths*

*When the smokes of autumn and of cannons drift past,
Oh October*

*O October
Season of poetry, of the total daring
Of starting one's life at every moment anew,
You gave me the magic ring which, when turned,
Sends down a gleam from your jewel of freedom,
Oh October*

There is much with which to reproach us.
Given the choice, we rejected peaceful silence
And long meditation on the structure of the world
Which deserves respect. Neither the eternal moment
Attracted us as it should, nor purity of style.
We wanted, instead, to move as words move,
Raising the dust of names and of events.
We didn't care enough that they disappear
In a thousand sparks and we with them. Even
The disrepute we have taken on ourselves
Was not completely far from our designs,
And so, though unwillingly, we pay the price.

Many a man will concede, if he knows himself,
That he was like one who hears a chorus
Of voices and doesn't know what they mean.
Thence, fury. A foot to the accelerator, as if
Speed could save us from voices and phantoms.
We trailed everywhere an invisible rope
And felt its hook inside us every moment.

And yet the accusers were mistaken, if,
Shedding tears over the evils of this age,

They saw us as angels, hurled into an abyss,
Shaking our fists at the works of God.
There is no doubt that many perished, infamously,
Because, like an illiterate discovering chemistry,
They suddenly discovered relativity and time.
For others the very roundness of a stone
Picked up on the bank of a river provided
The lesson. Or the bleeding gills of a perch,
Or—the moon rising over banks of clouds—
A beaver ploughing the slumbering softness of water.

For contemplation fades without resistance.
For its own sake, it should be forbidden.
And we, certainly, were happier than those
Who drank sadness from the books of Schopenhauer,
While they listened from their garrets to the din
Of music from the tavern down below.
At least poetry, philosophy, action were not,
For us, separated, as they were for them,
But joined in one will: we needed to be of use.
And that is the—sometimes burdensome—recompense.

If we, thought our faults were merely historical,
Will not receive the laurel of long fame,
So what, after all? Some are given monuments
And mausoleums, yet in a soft May rain,
Covered by a single overcoat, a boy and girl
Rush by, entirely indifferent to that perfection.
And some word of us may remain in any case,
Some remembrance of our half-opened lips:
They did not have time to say what they wanted.

Spirits of the air, of fire, of water,
Keep close to us, but not too close.
The ship's propeller drives us from you.
It's not fulfilled: the old hope that Neptune
Will show his beard, trailing a retinue of nymphs.
Nothing but ocean which boils and repeats:
In vain, in vain. Nothingness is so strong
We try to master it by thinking of the bones
Of pirates, the silky eyebrows of governors
On which the crabs feast. And our hands grip
Harder at the cool metal of the railing.
Look for help in the smell of paint and soap.
The ship's body, creaking, carries the freight
of our foolishness, vagueness, and hidden faith,
The dirt of our subjectivity, and the homeless
White faces of the ones who were killed in combat.
Carries it where? To the isles of bliss? No,
In us storm winds drowned that stanza of Horace
A penknife worked into a wooden bench at school.
It will not find us in this salt and void:

Iam Cytherea choros ducit Venus imminente luna

Brie-Comte-Robert, 1956