

Today's Martyrs

Resources for understanding current Christian witness and martyrdom

Meditation – The Wormwood Star

Do horses run on rocks? Does one plough the sea with oxen? But you have turned justice into poison and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood – Amos 6:12

A “hyper-selfish cat” listens to the confession of an old man. He remembers his past as “a train of rooms” and expresses “certainty I have experienced miraculous narrow escapes for which I vowed to God my gratitude”.

So begins *The Wormwood Star*, a poem by Czeslaw Milosz.

The finale of *The Wormwood Star* has been used in some Christian literature as a malevolent hint of the atheistic version of the delusion of total control, due to its use of the language of totalitarianism and its invocation of the greatest of the Roman persecutors. So the reader might know something of it, but what does the full poem say, and who was Czeslaw Milosz?



It turns out that Czeslaw Milosz was an interesting man indeed. He is probably the only person to be awarded a Nobel Prize (in Literature) and to be declared Righteous Among the Nations for having rescued Jews during the Second World War. Originally repelled by the anti-Semitism of prewar Polish right-wing politics and attracted to atheism as a youth, he defected from the postwar Polish Communist government. His book *The Captive Mind* became a staple of anti-totalitarian literature; in it he wrote a comment that is a clear reinforcement of the wisdom of the salt-of-the-earth view of Jesus: “My own decision [to defect] proceeded, not from the functioning of the reasoning mind, but from the stomach” – the intellect can rationalize anything, but the moral sense can take only so much before it revolts. He later returned to the Church and died a Christian. His writings should be more widely known, and this essay is meant in part to encourage anyone so interested to seek them out.

The Wormwood Star retraces the life of a man in the Twentieth Century:

When Thomas brought news that the
house I was born in no longer exists,
Neither the lane nor the park sloping to
the river, nothing,
I had a dream of return. Multicolored.
Joyous. I was able to fly.
And the trees were even higher than in
childhood, because they had been
growing during all the years since they had been cut down.

His first memories are that of a First World War army field hospital near his home, from which come “screams” and “blasphemies”. At some point – which is not clear – he becomes aware of the Powers that care nothing for human suffering. He is then an older child in a patriotic youth group, being served cocoa, then a young adult with a stronger drink. He begins to lose faith, as other young people around him do, perhaps because they do. But he also comes to see the harm done by those who abandon faith:

Northern sunset, beyond the lake a song of harvesters.
They move about, tiny, binding the last sheaves.
Who has the right to imagine how they return to the village,
And sit down by the fire and cook and cut their bread?
Or how their fathers lived in huts without chimneys,

When every roof would smoke as if on fire?...
And who has the right to guess how the sun will set in the future
Over a prison train or the sleep of rigs on building sites,
To make himself a god who looks through their windows
And shakes his head and walks off full of pity because he knows so much?

At the end the free verse is abandoned, and the atheistic delusion is imposed with a regimented meter that has all of the force of the roll of militaristic snare drums:

In a night train...a young man, my ancient self, incomprehensibly identical with me...wakes up, rubs his eyes, and above the tossed-back scarecrows of the pines he sees a dark blue expanse in which, low on the horizon, one blood-red star is glowing.

The Wormwood Star

Under the Wormwood star bitter rivers flowed.
Man in the fields gathered bitter bread.
No sign of the divine care shone in the heavens.
The century wanted homage from the dead.

They traced their origin to the dinosaur
And took their deftness from the lemur's paw.
Above the cities of their thinking lichen,
Flights of pterodactyls proclaimed the law.

They tied the hands of man with barbed wire.
And dug shallow graves at the edge of the wood.
There would be no truth in his last testament.
They wanted him anonymous for good.

The planetary empire was at hand.
They said what was speech and what was listening.
The ash had hardly cooled after the great fire
When Diocletian's Rome again stood glistening.

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