

A Message from the Horizon from Two Striving Towards Being

By David Joseph Belcastro

Introduction¹

Czeslaw Milosz wrote *The Captive Mind* during the early years of the 1950s.² The book was written in response to Western intellectuals' attraction to the new world order of the Stalinist movement. Troubled by the allure of totalitarianism, Milosz offered an exposé of minds held captive by doctrines that in his estimation were detrimental to the flourishing of human life. Thomas Merton found something in *The Captive Mind* that resonated with him. After reading *The Captive Mind*, he initiated correspondence with Milosz on December 6, 1958.³ The correspondence ended with a postcard from Merton while in India, dated November 21, 1968 (*STB* 178), shortly before his death in Thailand on December 10. *Striving towards Being*, the title given to their collection of 40 letters, was selected from Milosz's letter to Merton of October 5, 1961: "I feel . . . that all is futility except our striving towards Being. . . . I know the only subject for a philosopher and for a poet is the verb 'to be'" (*STB* 133). This focus on *Being* was present from the outset and remained a primary concern throughout the exchange of letters.

Merton and Milosz sought an alternative to the modern world's preoccupation with analyzing, structuring and programming humanity. Their concern was the simple act of being. Consequently, the alternative they sought focused on the cultivation of life that, while utilizing the tools of science and technology, does so in light of the wisdom that lies within the hearts of men and women – a light that in their opinion was dimmed in the modern world, thereby leaving humanity lost and the whole living world at risk.

The letters have been recognized as a particularly significant set in the Merton collection of more than 15,000 letters exchanged with over 2,100 correspondents. Their significance is due to several factors. The intimate friendship reflected in the letters was remarkable and presents an excellent example of honest engagement, productive collaboration and collective wisdom. The depth of thought that flows through the letters is impressive, representing as it does the effort of both men to penetrate the limitations of their own thinking. And, finally, their courage to address the nihilism of the present age and at the same time to affirm the sublime beauty of the world is notable.

In his sixth letter to Milosz, dated May 6, 1960, Merton attached a poem entitled "A Message from the Horizon":



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Look, a naked runner,
A messenger,
Following the wind
From budding hills.

By sweet sunstroke

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Wounded and signed
 (He is therefore sacred)
 Silence is his way.

Rain is his own
 Most private weather.
 But surprise is his first star.

This stranger, this
 Early hope flies fast:
 A mute comet, an empty sun:
 Adam is his name!

O primeval angel
 Virgin brother of astonishment,
 Born of one word, one bare
 Inquisitive diamond!

O blessed
 Invulnerable cry,
 O unplanned Saturday!
 O lucky Father!

Come without warning
 O friend of hurricanes,
 Lightning in your bones!
 We will open to you
 Our most noble door:

Open to rain, to somersaulting air,
 To everything that swims,
 To skies that wake
 Flare and applaud!

(It is too late: he flew the other way,
 Wrapping his honesty in rain!)

* * *

Pardon all runners
 All speechless, alien winds,
 All mad waters.

Pardon their impulses

Their wild attitudes
 Their young flight – their reticence!

When a message has no clothes on
 How can it be spoken? (*STB* 77-78)⁴

While Merton provides no explanation as to why he included the poem with the letter, the purpose of this presentation will be to consider ways in which the poem offers a perspective for understanding and appreciating the two poets' roles as messengers from the horizon.

Messengers of a Message without Clothes

From the outset of the correspondence, Merton and Milosz are concerned with the challenge of articulating a message for the modern world. Merton's first letter states his commitment to this endeavor:

It seems to me that, as you point out, and as other writers like yourself say or imply (Koestler, Camus etc) there *has to be* a third position, a position of integrity, which refuses subjection to the pressures of two massive groups ranged against each other in the world. It is quite simply obvious that the future, in plain dialectical terms, rests with those of us who risk our heads and our necks and everything in the difficult, fantastic job of finding out the new position, the ever changing and moving "line" that is no line at all because it cannot be traced out by political dogmatists. And that is the difficulty, and the challenge. (*STB* 4)

The difficulty and challenge was with finding a language suitable for a message that "has no clothes." Aware that their message would be delivered to world that "subsist[s] on institutional slogans" (*STB* 36), they knew that their message would go unheeded. To be heard, this message would have to be delivered by naked runners carrying a message that "has no clothes." A new language was required – a language from outside the ideological fabrications of an Orwellian world, a language that witnesses to Being, resonates with Life and "Come[s] without warning, / O friend of hurricanes, / Lightening in your bones!"

For Milosz, it would mean turning his poetic voice to the singular task of announcing the absence of an essential dimension of the human experience in the modern world. His poems were intended to draw the reader into an awareness of a one-dimensional worldview consisting of an "empty Sky, no pity, stone wasteland, life ended by death" (*STB* 62). Milosz grieves in his poetry the loss of a deeper dimension that alone is able to offer a meaningful experience of life. In a poem entitled "Second Space" we find:

Let us weep, lament the enormity of the loss.
 Let us smear our faces with coal, loosen our hair.
 Let us implore that it be returned to us,
 That second space.⁵

Milosz believed that this loss comes with serious consequences. In one of his last poems, entitled "Scientists" (*Second Space* 25), he notes that the experience of beauty in nature is now considered "suspect." As a consequence of "the accountancy of a capitalist enterprise" we are left with only a

faint memory of the “disinterested beauty of [nature’s] sheer superabundance [that once] gratified our eyes.” With that loss, a “devilish” theory became public that segregated the human species into cages, dismissed “as a genetic loss [and] poisoned.”

For Merton, multiple languages – anti-poetry, zen photography, etc. – were used to break through the one-dimensional worldview to reveal what was lost. For him the loss of the deeper dimension contributed to an illusion of separateness that permitted crimes against humanity and nature. This he expressed in “Chant to be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces” (*ESF* 43-47; *CP* 345-49), wherein the commander of a concentration camp takes pride in managing an efficient machine that “purifies,” and at the end of the poem confronts the reader with doing the same but with “missiles fired from a distance.”

In complementary ways, Merton and Milosz were committed to finding a language for their message that could witness to the fundamental flaw in a modern view of the world reduced to one dimension, a flaw that in their opinion is the root cause of all forms of tyranny and violence.

Messengers from the Horizon

According to the poem, the message comes from a horizon beyond the constructed and limited perspectives of the modern world. This is true not only of the message but also of the messenger. The messenger is identified at the opening of the poem as a “naked runner” and later as a “stranger” named “Adam” – a “primeval angel” and “Virgin brother of astonishment.” These images suit both Merton and Milosz. Throughout their correspondence the two poets struggle with their lives on the margin of society where they live as strangers in the world. In a letter dated March 28, 1961, Merton tells Milosz that they must bear their solitude, accepting moral isolation in order to regain a sense of *being* with confidence in a deeper reality that lies beyond the horizon of this age – a primeval and virginal reality (see *STB* 115).

Merton’s solitude was the result of his decision to enter a monastery and later a hermitage. Milosz’s was the result of his self-imposed exile. In both cases, the solitude was an essential part of their vocations as poets. By the very nature of their vocations, they were destined to be at odds with their age. Furthermore, they understood that their disagreement with the world was central to their message. For this reason, Merton recommends to Milosz that if there is one ambition that they should allow themselves, it is “to *be* a complete piece of systematic irony in the middle of the totalitarian lie – or capitalist one. And even the official religious one” (*STB* 56).

Merton and Milosz sought to clarify their lives of solitude and roles as naked runners. In a letter dated May 21, 1959, Merton works with an image of themselves as turtles whose institutional shells obstruct their shared desire for truth, peace, sanity in life, reality, sincerity. But could they live without those shells? As Merton observes, “a turtle without a shell is not likely to lead a happy life, especially in a world like ours” (*STB* 36). It was not clear where Merton was going with this. The last line of this letter, however, provides some clarity. Merton says to Milosz, “You are wise even in your insecurity, for today insecurity and wisdom are inseparable” (*STB* 43-44). Naked runners and turtles without shells both live outside the security provided by shells and clothes, as do Merton and Milosz, who live outside the security of institutional identities. By saying that insecurity and wisdom are inseparable, Merton appears to be suggesting that everything has to be stripped away if they are to discover the wisdom necessary for striving towards Being and bearing witness to what

lies beyond the horizon.

While marginal to and in disagreement with the world, they did not see themselves as “against ‘the world’” (*STB* 87). Nor did they see themselves as “innocent bystanders” (see *STB* 43). Living at the horizon of a new world, they remained committed to the old world. Their service to that world, however, was dependent on their critical perspective on modern society. From such a vantage point, Merton and Milosz saw America as insufficiently prepared for the days ahead (see *STB* 73). Even so, the vision from the horizon of a deeper reality provided Merton and Milosz with hope.

A Message of Silence from the Horizon

Their hope was grounded in a reality that was beyond words – an ineffable reality of profound truth announced in and throughout the silence of the universe. “Look, a naked runner . . . Silence is his way.” Silence is the message that both Milosz and Merton sought to communicate through their work. Their poetry echoed of that deeper dimension of life to which the modern world had become deaf. Merton’s photography and calligraphy likewise witnessed to a wholeness to which the modern world had become blind. And that poem that Merton enclosed in a letter to Milosz – the one entitled “A Message from the Horizon” – resounds according to Merton with an emptiness that “is fullness, not mere vacuum” (*STB* 75). But fullness of what? Early in the correspondence, Merton writes about the hidden ground of love as a silence with “infinite power capable of destroying all hatred, all evil, all injustice, all that is diabolical” (*STB* 55). And with this in mind, he says to Milosz:

Milosz – life is on our side. The silence and the Cross of which we know are forces that cannot be defeated. In silence and suffering, in the heartbreaking effort to be honest in the midst of dishonesty (most of all our *own* dishonesty), in all these is victory. . . .

Deep affection and solidarity in Christ –

Tom Merton

(*STB* 19-20).

1. An earlier version of this material was presented at the annual conference of the College English Association on March 28, 2014 in Baltimore, MD.
2. Czeslaw Milosz, *The Captive Mind*, trans. Jane Zielonko (London: Mercury, 1953).
3. 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) 3-6; subsequent references will be cited as “*STB*” parenthetically in the text.
4. This is a somewhat earlier version of the poem published as “A Messenger from the Horizon,” in Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963) 47-49 (subsequent references will be cited as “*ESF*” parenthetically in the text); Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 349-51 (subsequent references will be cited as “*CP*” parenthetically in the text).
5. Czeslaw Milosz, *Second Space: New Poems*, trans. Robert Hass and Czeslaw Milosz (New York: Ecco, 2005) 3; subsequent references will be cited as “Milosz, *Second Space*” parenthetically in the text.