

*Consciousness*

By Czeslaw Milosz

1. Consciousness enclosed in itself every separate birch  
And the woods of New Hampshire, covered in May with green  
haze.

The faces of people are in it without number, the courses  
Of planets, and things past and a portent of the future.  
Then one should extract from it what one can, slowly,  
Not trusting anybody. And it won't be much, for language is  
weak.

2. It is alien and useless to the hot lands of the living.  
Leaves renew themselves, birds celebrate their nuptials  
Without its help. And a couple on the bank of a river  
Feel their bodies draw close right now, possessed by a nameless  
power.

3. I think that I am here, on this earth,  
To present a report on it, but to whom I don't know.  
As if I were sent so that whatever takes place  
Has meaning because it changes into memory.

4. Fat and lean, old and young, male and female,  
Carrying bags and valises, they defile in the corridors of an  
airport.  
And suddenly I feel it is impossible.  
It is the reverse side of a Gobelin  
And behind there is the other which explains everything.

5. Now, not any time, here, in America  
I try to isolate what matters to me most.  
I neither absolve nor condemn myself.

The torments of a boy who wanted to be nice  
And spent a number of years at the project.

The shame of whispering to the confessional grille  
Behind which heavy breath and a hot ear.

The monstrance undressed from its patterned robe,  
A little sun rimmed with sculptured rays.

Evening devotions of the household in May,  
Litanies to the Maiden,

Mother of the Creator.

And I, conscience, contain the orchestra of regimental  
brasses  
On which the moustachioed ones blew for the  
Elevation.

And musket volleys on Easter Saturday night  
When then cold dawn had hardly reddened.

I am fond of sumptuous garments and disguises  
Even if there is no truth in the painted Jesus.

Sometimes believing, sometimes not believing,  
With others like myself I unite in worship.

Into the labyrinth of gilded baroque cornices  
I penetrate, called by the saints of the Lord.

I make my pilgrimage to the miraculous places  
Where a spring spurted suddenly from rock.

I enter the common childishness and brittleness  
Of the sons and daughters of the human tribe.

And I preserve faithfully the prayer in the cathedral:  
Jesus Christ, son of God, enlighten me, a sinner.

6. I – consciousness – originate in skin,  
Smooth or covered with thickets of hair.  
The stubby cheek, the pubes, and the groin  
Are mine exclusively, though not only mine.  
And at the same instant, he or she – consciousness –  
Examines its body in a mirror,  
Recognizing a familiar which is not quite its own.

Do I, when I touch one flesh in the mirror,  
Touch every flesh, learn consciousness of the other?

Or perhaps not at all, and it, unattainable,  
Perceives in its own, strictly its own, manner?

7. You will never know what I feel, she said,  
Because you are filling me and are not filled.

8. The warmth of dogs and the essence, inscrutable, of

doggishness.

Yet I feel it. In the lolling of the humid tongue,  
In the melancholy velvet of the eyes,  
In the scent of fur, different from our own, yet related.  
Our humanness becomes more marked then,  
The common one, pulsating, slavering, hairy,  
Though for the dogs it is we who are like gods  
Disappearing in crystal palaces of reason,  
Busy with activities beyond comprehension.

I want to believe that the forces above us,  
Engaged in doings we cannot imitate,  
Touch our cheeks and our hair sometimes  
And feel in themselves this poor flesh and blood.

9. Every ritual, astonishing human arrangements.  
The dresses in which they move, more durable than  
they are,  
The gestures that freeze in air, to be filled by those  
born later,  
Words that were pronounced by the dead, here and  
still in use.  
And erotic: they guess under the fabric  
Dark triangles of hair, are attentive to convexities in silk.  
Faithful to the ritual because it differs so much from  
their natures,  
And soars above them, above the warmth of mucous  
membrane,  
On the incomprehensible borderline between mind and  
flesh.

10. Certainly, I did not reveal what I really thought.  
Why should I reveal it? To multiply misunderstandings?  
And reveal to whom? They are born, they mature  
In a long pause and refuse to know what comes later.  
Anyway I won't avert anything. All my life it was like that:  
To know and not be able to avert. I must give them reason.  
They have no use for lives lived sometime in the future  
And the torments of their descendants are not their  
concern.

What are you? In your writings there is nothing except  
immense amazement.

In an intermediary phase, after the end of one era and  
before the beginning of a new one. Such as I am, with habits

and beliefs acquired in childhood, which were impossible to maintain, to which I was loyal and disloyal, self-contradictory, a voyager through the lands of dream, legend, myth, I would not like to pretend I reason clearly.

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