

## PERMANENCE (AFTER CZESLAW MILOSZ)

by MARK DANNER

You must remember this: A long hallway, stretching from one gallery to the farthest one at the end of the building. It would have been in a national gallery or some museum suitably grand. Perhaps you are crossing from one gallery to another, or meandering to the café, or striding to the grand front doors. But whatever your destination, you spot out of the corner of your eye in that instant of fortuitous crossing, at the furthest extent of the hallway, a shining canvas. At the extreme of your peripheral vision blossoms a startling arrangement of colors and lines. It is a Veronese!

What is critical is the distance is too great to tell the subject or indeed even to discern whether it is a gathering of figures or a landscape or what. And yet as certain as you are of your uncertainty you know in that instant of glimpsing that you are looking at the hand of Veronese. Or Titian. Or Cézanne. Or Ingres.

And yet how is this possible? Don't burble to me about style and technique and palette and other such nonsense. No, says Milosz, what you see is the spirit. (Or does he say soul? Well, one or the other. And it would have been in Polish. And what does it matter anyway?) It is what he or she had that no one else had or ever will have. It is what allows us to recognize, like an old friend, an inchoate interplay of color. Or a musical phrase we have never heard before. And to recognize instantly that that can only be our old friend speaking to us from 1518 or 1793 or 1886.

What is lovely, though, is that Milosz is quick to say that though we all have spirits (or souls) that are absolutely individual, it is the artist who is able to embody it, to freeze it into the strokes of a paintbrush or the notes of a violin, and thus to achieve some sort of permanence. Call it a beautiful consolation. But only a consolation. For even then it is only an imperfect permanence. What else can it be, in this impermanent world?