

Miłosz's Quest for Affirmation and His Reflections on US-American Culture

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Abstract: In his article "Miłosz's Quest for Affirmation and His Reflections on US-American Culture" Joel J. Janicki discusses Czesław Miłosz's writings in exile devoted to his home in California. Miłosz, a Polish Lithuanian poet, essayist, and historian of literature, after experiencing five years of the Nazi regime in Warsaw and six years of Stalinized rule in post-World War II Poland, threw himself "into the abyss" of exile. Miłosz's writings and translations have served as a bridge between the Polish and Anglo-Saxon cultures seldom encountered on such a scale. At the same time, his ability to look at a distance, his sensitivity to the powers of conformity present in both communist and capitalist states, the breadth of his knowledge, and multiple perspectives combine to give him a rare insight into the human condition. Janicki analyses the choices and priorities Miłosz set for himself in coming to grips with US-American culture, geography, and poetry as reflected in his writings.

Joel J. JANICKI

Miłosz's Quest for Affirmation and His Reflections on US-American Culture

A contemporary reader should find it not amiss that Edward W. Said first dealt with themes of exile and imperialism as a literary critic through his study of the Polish exile Joseph Conrad. His analysis of *Heart of Darkness* serves as the introductory essay to *Culture and Imperialism*. Conrad himself had examined the destructive aspects of modern society and the domination of the Asian, African, and South American continents by the European powers. His ability to convey uncomfortable truths about the human condition and the penetrating essence of an epoch was owing in a large part, as acknowledged by Said, to his self-consciousness as an expatriate Pole and as an employee of the imperial system. His "extraordinarily residual sense of his own exilic marginality standing at the junction of two worlds" (Said, *Culture* 24) marked out for him an ironic distance from what he was describing, making him a distinctive hybrid of insider-outsider.

Exile has been an all too common feature of the Polish experience for most of the past two centuries. Poland's culture has been shaped by loss of national sovereignty and domination by its powerful German and Russian neighbors and its incorporation first into the Russian empire and later into the Soviet bloc. Exile has been the heritage shared by many of the most creative and influential representatives of Polish culture, the composer and pianist Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849), and the national bards Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855), Juliusz Slowacki (1809-1849) and Cyprian Norwid (1821-1883) in the nineteenth century and such notable writers in the twentieth century as Witold Gombrowicz, Sławomir Mrożek, Alexander Wat, and Czesław Miłosz. Miłosz (1911-2004) sharpened his critical insight by his position on the periphery. His native land of Lithuania is located on the northeastern fringe of Europe, although his native language is Polish. Tomas Venclova, a Lithuanian poet and essayist, praises him as a writer "who knows more than others in our time about the boundaries of human experience, about the dignity of language, and about higher fidelity" (128). Miłosz is a Central European poet whose life spanned the twentieth century; consequently, he experienced first-hand "the ordeals that have defined our age," i.e., totalitarian civilization in its German and Soviet variants — ordeals that he treats in original and thoughtful ways in lyric poems (e.g., "A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto," "A Song on the End of the World") and in his prose essays (e.g., *The Captive Mind*). His experience of the human condition is refracted through his personal geography and history, the specific times and places of his sojourn on this earth.

Miłosz's native realm was multi-cultural. He came from an educated Polish family far from the center of Polish culture in a frontier province of the Russian empire, where peasants and workers spoke Lithuanian and a majority of city dwellers were Yiddish-speaking Jews. He distinguished himself early as a poet in touch with avant-garde movements in Poland and European cultural centers and was associated in the 1930s with the Catastrophists, whose pessimism was soon borne out by events. He spent the years of World War II in Nazi-occupied Warsaw, a city that bore witness to the twin uprisings of the Jews and the Polish Underground, testaments to tragic heroism and horrific suffering. In the immediate post-war period Miłosz allied himself with the new pro-Russian government and, owing to his political connections and English language skills — he translated T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land* during the war, a work of art altogether apropos to the local landscape at the time — he became a member of the diplomatic corps serving in the Western capitals of Paris, New York, and Washington at a time of iron-curtain isolation separating East and West. In spite of the advantages of his position, in 1951 he chose for himself a life in exile, a life of autonomy from rigid political control and censorship, the effects of which he described soon thereafter in *The Captive Mind*, published in Paris. He spent ten years in the French capital before he resettled in the United States in 1960 where he was offered a position in the Department of Slavic Literatures at the University of California Berkeley. This was a fortuitous development providing him with a new vantage point, economic stability, a stimulating environment, and the luxury of time that allowed him to continue to write and redefine himself as a writer.

Miłosz's willpower and dedication together with a long and productive life as a poet, novelist, and essayist saw him confront and come to terms with the many vicissitudes in the life of an exile and solidify his standing as one of the eminent spokespersons for the cultures of Central and East Europe

and the West. His efforts culminated in the recognition of being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1980. In his numerous prose writings, Miłosz provides distinctive views on writers and ideas which bore a great influence on his own worldview, including such writers as Mickiewicz, Wat, Gombrowicz, Simone Weil, William Blake, and the Swedish mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg, as well as the Russians Fyodor Dostoevsky, Lev Shestov, and Nikolai Berdiaev. Ultimately, his abiding faith and commitment to the power of language and the naming of things allowed him to circumvent the external restraints imposed by totalitarian regimes, with their efforts to falsify the past and enforce a slavery of the spirit, and the strong sense of isolation and alienation he experienced in the capitalist west to arrive at measured affirmation: "I never look at things through rose-colored glasses" he admitted at a public reading of his poems in 1982 in response to a question posed by the present author.

In a short essay "Notes on Exile" written in English and originally published in 1976, Miłosz identifies some of the traps and challenges as well as the strategies of the writer in exile. In one aphoristic passage he notes: "Exile accepted as a destiny, in the way we accept an incurable illness, should help us see through our self-delusions" (*To Begin* 13). One of the central concerns for the poet detached from his homeland is the loss of an engaged readership, the loss of community, resulting in the incomprehensibility or meaninglessness of what he has to say to his new audience. The poet ends up at a dead end: "Nobody listens, and, moreover, he forgot what he had to say." Life or death issues in one's homeland, the poet's rhythmic, inspired voice riveting the people into a unified entity, become moot points with no relevance for his new countrymen. Any local interest in the works of a writer in exile is incidental (*To Begin* 13-14). Miłosz learned to adapt by changing his language, at least in part. Although he continued to think and write primarily in Polish, he did begin writing in the language of his country of residence and oversaw the translation of his major works into English. His *The History of Polish Literature*, first published in 1965, is a labor of love providing the English-language reader with a broad sweep of Polish literary culture and bi-lingual excerpts from many of the most important writers. At the same time Miłosz was able to maintain his cultural presence in Poland by his frequent contributions to the most important periodical publication outside Poland, the Parisian monthly *Kultura* (1947-2000). Later, in the late 1970s and the 1980s he would contribute poems and essays to Polish underground publications, especially *Zapis* (Record 1976-1982) and *Zeszyty literackie* (Literary Notebooks 1982-), with which he was associated from its first issue in 1982 through the remainder of his life.

Culture in an increasingly broad sense became a source of identity for Miłosz. I explore here to explore the degree to which Miłosz came to identify with his new cultural setting that began in the youth-oriented culture of the U.S. in the rebellious decade of the 1960s on the Berkeley campus. Miłosz's thoughts and views are gleaned from a variety of sources, including individual poems and the essays that comprise *Visions from San Francisco Bay* (1975) and his series of the Charles Norton Eliot lectures later collected in *The Witness to Poetry* (1983). The international recognition Miłosz gained from the Nobel Prize won him "redemption" in Poland when he made his first visit to his homeland after thirty years of exile. This was in 1981, the highpoint of the Solidarity period of Polish cultural freedom of expression under communism. He was reincorporated into "official" literature as a generous representation of his poems was published in an anthology of twentieth-century Polish poetry (see Lam). After the imposition of Martial Law in December 1981 he became a fixture of underground literature in the periodicals *Zapis* and *Zeszyty Literackie*. He shared a fate similar to that of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, perhaps the most noteworthy denouncer of the evils of totalitarianism, in coming home for good from a life in exile. He settled in the Polish cultural capital of Kraków in 1994 where he spent the final ten years of his life. His funeral was accorded the dignity and honors of a national hero.

Said writes of the contrapuntal and nomadic identity that emerges from the transformations imposed by forces of imperialism which makes all cultures hybrid and heterogeneous. The problem of identity and the notion of self-definition through the nation of one's birth are compounded by the degree to which one fosters a new identity in a new land and the extent to which one's works are part of a universal heritage (*Culture*). These issues have been confronted by Miłosz. The utter transformation via Sovietization of his original Lithuanian homeland and its own deeply heterogeneous nature sensitized him to the reality of historical experience. A more complete understanding comes

with being on two sides of a divide. Miłosz experienced the divides of Lithuanian peasant culture, Jewish urban culture, the last stage of Russian imperial culture, German Nazi rule, as well as the Cold War ideological divide separating communism from its anti-communist counterpart in the West, all the time giving expression to this ravaged cultural experience through the medium of the Polish language, albeit abetted by translations of his works into English by a network of scholars and poets.

Said describes contrapuntalism as a connection or mutual consideration of otherwise disparate social practices, of culture and empire, of history and the present: "We must be able to think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal formations, its internal coherence and system of external relationships, all of them co-existing and interacting with others" (*Culture* 36). For Said, the critic/artist assumes a responsibility of "contrapuntal" mediation: the poet in exile, given his ability to adapt and refocus his creative insight, undertakes the "transfer of cultural capital" that lends itself to a "contrapuntal" mediation of his old and new worlds, the writer in exile who has successfully merged his/her meditative capacity that highlights connections is not outside and beyond them (*Culture* 65). Indeed, the writer who has crossed boundaries and has entered liminal space is capable of engendering cultural exchanges.

Miłosz has been particularly successful in nurturing the contrapuntal meditation, a "double vision," in those writings of his in which he casts a special light on the terrain and distinctive features of his long lost native realm and his adopted homeland which nevertheless uncover correspondences that reinforce both aspects of this vision. He has taken seriously other cultures as alternatives to imperialism and rival geographies with their distinctive historical and cultural narratives. Yet, he remains grounded in his native traditions, their patterns of life, preserving the resplendent beauty of the Lithuanian countryside with its manifold pagan superstitions in his poetic eye and heart. A moment of reflection conjures "the smell of tradition which in a strange way sometimes outlives all historical catastrophes — Vilnius — perhaps the most beautiful [city] in Eastern Europe" (*Native Realm* 14). From the perspective of Venclova, his fellow Lithuanian poet, "in exile Miłosz remained the most vital and the most important poet of his motherland. If one considers exile to be not a misfortune but a destiny and a problem, then Miłosz solved this problem at least as well as the nineteenth-century Polish poets Norwid and Mickiewicz" (Venclova 118). In the figure of his relative and mentor, Oscar Miłosz, he sought for and discovered an affirmation of his Lithuanian identity. In the older Miłosz he saw an exile before it became so commonplace — before it grew "to the dimensions of a universal condition" (*The Land* 75).

For the writer in exile, "the notion of homeland is born of the same realm as myth and fable" (*The Land* 77). For Poles the idea of homeland is most closely identified with *Pan Tadeusz* (1833) by the Lithuanian Polish poet Mickiewicz. Miłosz views the national epic as a "realized fairy tale" in the poet's aspiration for a genuine homeland, a need that is also a product of the imagination (*The Land* 77). The constant presence of Mickiewicz serves him as the embodiment of the poetic vocation and a spiritual leader of one's people. Miłosz shares with Mickiewicz the prophetic gift of the poet, a scorn for the unenlightened, a duty to enlighten them if they have a mind to heed, a religious, metaphysical pulse, a fascination with the variety of life and nature, and a strong sense of the sacred. Like his forbear, Miłosz attempts to summarize experience with roots in nature and history. Much of Miłosz's success as a writer in exile stems from the continuity his life in California afforded him, in particular, by the position he held at the University of California for over thirty-five years. There he fostered relations with a number of younger poets and translators with whom he collaborated in translating his poems and those of other reputable Polish poets while at the same time forging ties with a younger generation of US-American creative artists. There he became acclimated to a new geography, a new U.S. landscape and nature he addressed and came to terms with in his writings.

Irena Gross Grudzinska, in writing about Miłosz in the U.S., writes that "all our ideas have their origin in our concept of place" (203). Miłosz's perch on a hill overlooking San Francisco colors his vision, the sharp contrasts from his Lithuanian homeland rendering his memory keener and his imagination more vivid. "America," Miłosz has written, "is the country of the greatest and most extreme exile. It is a continent of chronic homelessness" (*Visions* 50). It is noteworthy that Miłosz's constant companion was a volume written by his fellow Lithuanian poet in exile, who also wrote in

Polish, the aforementioned Mickiewicz. The first lines of *Pan Tadeusz*, the Polish national epic, read: "Lithuania, my homeland, you are like health. / Only he who has lost you knows how to esteem you" (3-4). In a similar use of the vocative case, with its direct address to a personified object, Miłosz both echoes Mickiewicz and expresses homage to his native language in the verse "Moja wierna mowa" ("My faithful mother tongue") in the manner one would speak of one's faithful wife. The poem was written in Berkeley in 1968 in the verse cycle *Miasto bez imienia* (*City without a Name*) and indicates the poet's ambivalent relationship with his own language as a servant, a partner and a would-be mother/fatherland: "I thought you would serve as a go-between / between me and good people, though there be only twenty, ten of them. Or for those not yet born // You were my fatherland for there was not any other" (*Collected Poems* 216) ("Byłaś moja ojczyzna, bo zabrakło innej. / Myślałem, że będziesz także pośredniczka/ pomiędzy mną i dobrymi ludźmi? Choćby ich było dwudziestu, dziesięciu,? // Albo nie urodzili się jeszcze" [*Miasto* 81]).

A note of desperation is felt here. Miłosz conveys the exiled poet's sense of isolation in California identifying himself as cut off from society. The poisons of daily life which torment him are cured only by nature. The cultural gap aggravated by the lack of historical grounding of his US-American counterparts leads him to vent his frustrations on his language, his faithful partner, who has "betrayed" him, a source of beauty and power rendered meaningless and impotent in a land where English holds absolute sway. Yet, in the spirit of the exile reading descriptions of the homeland in *Pan Tadeusz*, Miłosz regains his poetic equilibrium: "My faithful language / perhaps I must save you. / From now on I'll place bowls of colors before you / bright and clear, if I am so able, / since moments of misfortune require some harmony and beauty" (*Collected Poems* 216) ("Moja wierna mowa, /może to jednak ja muszę cię ratować. / Więc będę dalej stawiać przed tobą miseczki z kolorami / jasnymi i czystymi jeżeli to możliwe, / bo w nieszczęściu potrzeby jakiś ład czy piękno" [*Miasto* 81]).

Traditionally, US-America's geography has been a salient point of interest for Europeans, the essential feature of US-American culture, and their readings of US-American literature from Washington Irving's descriptions of the Hudson River and the Catskill Mountains to vivid depictions of the sublime beauty of Niagara Falls by the Polish American Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz to Mark Twain's worshipful renderings of the Mississippi River. The US-American West has given rise to a rich literary tradition, whose writers such as Willa Cather and Wallace Stegner extol its rugged terrain and its wide open spaces and the sense of freedom mixed with awe the landscape inspires. Miłosz sees the California landscape as lunar and alien, one that poses an immense threat to humans. Nature is hostile to human ambition, relentless in imposing impediments both physical and psychic that render humans weak, unhealthy and fearful, and impose on them an endless stream of humiliations and suffering. For Miłosz, translator of the *Book of Job* into Polish, the ability to overcome suffering endows human nature with transcendence. "A human being is worthy of admiration because he suffers so much and remains undaunted in spite of it" (Błoński 20). The hostility of nature is what the poet must come to terms with.

Nevertheless, Miłosz is a representative citizen-artist and his writings serve as an affirmation of humanity. His poetry is a rich blend of discursiveness and lyricism grounded in a civic and historical consciousness. His poetic line reflects the traditional Polish verse of Mickiewicz, a strongly accented syllabic verse consisting of eleven or thirteen syllables usually unrhymed. Miłosz often referred to Walt Whitman as a model worthy of emulation with his openness to all aspects of life manifested in the flowing lines of his free verse. His Bible-inspired phrases and cadences, with their capaciousness and self-asserting dignity struck a deep chord with Miłosz. The two poets share an indulgence in the lyrical "I" and in their wide embrace of the world as reflected both in the abundance of expression and in the jeweled detail of individual lines (among the first works Miłosz published in *Zeszyty Literackie* were translations from Whitman's oeuvre). Like Whitman the poet-singer of *Song of Myself*, Miłosz projects his ego into his poems, often leaving the imprint of his name (or namesake) in the course of a poem. In the poem "A Magic Mountain" with its setting on the California coast, he reflects on the difficulties of adapting to a nature that is whimsical and contrary to expectations, one with a peculiar seasonal cycle of its own: "Soon after our arrival, / Budberg, gently pensive, / Said that in the beginning it is hard to get accustomed, / For here there is no spring or summer, no winter or fall" (*Collected Poems* 317).

The very name of "Budberg" conveys the sense of both flower and mountain. Nature appears, if not treacherous, at least full of mischief in failing to follow the pattern of seasons familiar to inhabitants of northeastern Europe; rather, it conspires with the local civilization to befuddle and disorient: "Sultry Octobers, cool Julys, trees blossom in February. / Here the nuptial flight of hummingbirds does not forecast spring. / Only the faithful maple sheds its leaves every year. / For no reason, its ancestors simply learned it that way" (317). Familiar unfamiliarity reigns herein, new patterns of existence once seemingly learned and imbibed to form the essence of self must be learned anew; such doings serve as a series of blows to the ego, this being a hard lesson in humility, for one with lofty ambitions: "So I won't have power, won't save the world? / Fame will pass me by, no tiara, no crown? / Did I then train myself, myself the Unique, / To compose stanzas for gulls and sea haze, / To listen to the foghorns blaring down below?" (318). The ego rebels at the diminished stature forced upon it by circumstance, dismayed by the seemingly prosaic images that present themselves to his fine-tuned poetic sensibility in lines that undermine the sublime sense of self. The self-deprecating "Wrong Honorable Professor Miłosz" follows good-naturedly in the line of his fellow exiles who have also been blessed to walk on "the magic mountain," blessed with the stamina to adjust to new conditions, to fashion themselves a new frame of being sturdy enough to weather whatever comes their way and patient enough to await the lifting of the fog.

A turning point for Miłosz was in the 1960s, his years at Berkeley, marked by a resurgence of lyricism prompted by existential questions of the permanent exile. The poem "Nigdy od ciebie, miasto" ("Never from you, O City") outlines the important cities in the lives of Polish poets: Warsaw, Kraków, Lwów, and Wilno written in Berkeley 1963, appearing in the collection *Gucio zaczarowany* (Gucio the Enchanted) (1965): "Never from you, o city, could I ever depart ... I made my escape around a world spinning faster and faster / But I was always there" (author's translation) ("Nigdy od ciebie, miasto, nie mogłem odjechać ... Uciekałem po ziemi obracającej się coraz prędszej / A zawsze byłem tam" [Zesłruy" 483]). Among the essays in *Visions* is one devoted to the California poet, Robinson Jeffers (1887-1962). A poet and prophet of doom, a nihilist, at the height of his popularity in the 1920s, Jeffers lost his standing both among readers and critics in the subsequent depression years. Nevertheless, the particularity of his mind, his vision of a dark continent, his fascination with the landscape itself and his sense of the ambiguous nature of truth all appealed to Miłosz, who has translated a number of his poems and devoted an essay to him. Like Melville and Miłosz himself, Jeffers was a Manichaeian and like Whitman, Jeffers was an Emerson-inspired transcendental individualist who had "trode down the road of redeeming despair" (Carpenter 13). His appeal to a poet like Miłosz was instinctive with his hard-grained truth, and his disturbing image of the human race as a horde of grasshoppers.

Miłosz cites "Continent's End" with its setting in Carmel as a quintessentially representative Jeffers poem and Miłosz is fascinated by the notion of the radical west and the austere western landscape. The poem has a supra-human scale; it is a poem of the land, where the continent meets the ocean, where "the boundaries of granite and spray" ignore humans and human concerns: they appear to exude a bitterness of mother earth toward the human spawn that has grown too proud: "The tides are in our veins, we still mirror the stars, / life is your child, but there is in me / Older and harder than life and more impartial, the eye that / watched before there was an ocean" (Jeffers 29). The surf rolls with ancient rhythms that stem from of the source of life itself. The rough, unyielding, austere quality of the natural images finds their human counterpart in the monument Jeffers created for himself, his stone house on the coast of Big Sur. It is a testament to human isolation and pessimism, a veneration of life forces that denigrates the human who has become too embroiled in destructive wars. This particular representative of *homo faber* has sought a separate peace with nature, forging an isolated retreat for himself in the unyielding granite and the rugged beauty of the Carmel shoreline. Jeffers chose a life of self-exile, one given over to meditation and harkening to the rhythmic motions and sounds of the waves perpetually crashing ashore. Miłosz acknowledges his affinity with the American poet while at the same time making critical distinctions: "I was sufficiently like him to re-create his thoughts from within and to feel what had given rise to them. But I did not like my own regal soarings above the Earth. That had been forced upon me and deserved to be called by its name, exile" ("Carmel" 229). The two poets, Miłosz observes, have their own peculiar vision of the ocean: for

Jeffers it is the incarnation of eternal beauty and harmony and for Miłosz, colored by his medieval imagination, it becomes an abyss akin to the impenetrable darkness of a monster-infested hell ("Carmel" 229).

Miłosz's tangible poetic presence comes across, oftentimes, in his consciousness of the sinful state of humanity, one doomed and deprived of the sense of eternal renewal of the creation that scorns human pride, of religious leaders invoking the authority of god, who designate followers as the chosen race, citing this as "proof of what lengths human insolence and arrogance could reach" ("Carmel" 230). His god is the god of the universe, who invests the earth and sea with pulsating rhythms while humans are granted but a diminished status in his poetic works. Miłosz sees himself as burdened by history; Jeffers engages in a dialogue with natural history that opposes the blatant narrowly materialistic values of the Californian hordes in search of their own dreams: "I fumed at his naiveté and his errors; I saw him as an example of all the faults peculiar to prisoners, exiles, and hermits. But here in Carmel, where he had his body burned and his ashes strewn to the wind, his spirit, perhaps reincarnated in the gulls or pelicans flying over the beach in majestic formation, challenged me to wrestle and, through its courage, gave me courage" ("Carmel" 232).

Miłosz dedicated one of his poems "To Robinson Jeffers" and invokes his own Slavic roots and the Scottish Irish roots of Jeffers. He fills the poem with his own imaginative allusions to black dinosaurs and Agamemnon before he arrives at the passing of mankind, and is left with "the pure and stony earth ... pounded by the ocean" (*Collected Poems* 224). He depicts a world of "God the Terrible" insensitive to human pleas and prayers — a world of basalt and granite and birds of prey. Miłosz's Lithuanian nature, the religious imagery of choir and monstrosity that reverts to his Catholic upbringing, nevertheless pursues the virtue of brotherhood, a comrade poet. He embraces the earth and what it teaches, reproves him(self) for his divine-like arrogance, invoking forces of evil and destruction, where he, Miłosz, speaking for the pagan-Christian past, implores protection from a feminized nature "against the mute and treacherous might" (225). In dark moments, Miłosz would come to see death as the real heroine ("death" [*śmierć*] is feminine in Polish) of the literature and art of his times — for death has no place in scientific-technological civilization. Therefore, it holds a place all the more prominent in art and serves as a constant source of meditation in Polish poetry. His own faith in the gospels and in Christ's triumph over death provides him with a poetic response to the Spirit of the Earth, thereby nullifying death's omnipotence (*To Begin Where I Am* 320). As a witness to the systematic destruction of Warsaw in the bloody and brutal aftermath of the August 1944 Uprising, he refused to accept the nihilistic vision staring him in the face and instead proclaimed a poetic protest against the very being of the Warsaw ruins: "In Warsaw / Was I born to become / A ritual mourner? / I want to sing of festivities, / The greenwood into which Shakespeare / Often took me. Leave / To poets a moment of happiness, / Otherwise, your world will perish" (*Collected Poems* 77).

Miłosz would seem to be the inveterate realist yet he has been blessed with a Blakean vision that provides a startling alternative, a dream that reality would deny. He is distraught by the alienation the modern poet has come to feel vis-à-vis the man in the street, the anxiety he feels brought on by his own sense of culture and refinement, and his language which has become incomprehensible to his ostensible reader: "Thus they have felt potentially subject to the mockery of the common man, who found their occupation unmanly" ("Poets and the Human Family," *Visions* 30). A phenomenon particularly true of US-American society is that its major poets are holed up in university English departments and their audience is limited to students and other poets/university intellectuals leading to, if not a mutual hostility between the elite and the ordinary citizen, certainly an indifference and a curious lack of curiosity. Miłosz gives form to his affirmation of life in the U.S. overlooking the San Francisco Bay in the poem "Gift" which reads more like a religious hymn (on this, see Blonski 188). The poem is characterized by a shifting of the perspective of the lyrical "I" from a simple man to a philosopher, who, as if filled with a greater awareness of his being in the world, becomes the recipient of the gift of metaphysical experience, an awakening the individual otherwise sleeping on earth, bereft of a sense of the transcendent: "Gift. // A day so happy. / Fog lifted early. I worked in the garden. / Hummingbirds were stopping over the honeysuckle flowers. / There was no thing on earth I wanted to possess. / I knew no one worth my envying him. / Whatever evil I had suffered, I forgot. / To think that once I was the same man did not embarrass me. / In my body I felt no pain. / When

straightening up, I saw blue sea and sails") (*Collected Poems* 251) ("Dar // Dzień taki szczęśliwy. / Mgła opadła wcześniej, pracowałem w ogrodzie. / Kolibry przystawały nad kwiatem kaprifolium. / Nie było na ziemi rzeczy, którą chciałbym mieć. / Nie znałem nikogo, komu warto byłoby zazdrościć. / Co przydarzyło się złego, zapomniałem. / Nie wstydziłem się myśleć, że byłem kim jestem. / Nie czułem w ciele żadnego bólu. / Prostując się, widziałem niebieskie morze i żagle" ["Ze struny" 486]).

In an essay entitled "On Hope" that concludes the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures he presented as Nobel Laureate, Miłosz stands above the fray of twentieth-century civilization with all the destructiveness of its wars and the ominous prognoses of things to come. Hope, the anti-utopian, apocalyptic nature of much twentieth-century writing notwithstanding, is the answer; hope buttressed by his understanding in the 1980s that the planet is becoming unified like never before, that the family of human beings is coming together in new and powerful ways. As he looks to the future, he emphasizes the importance of understanding and appreciating the past where he sees interlocking events that form a great chain of being: the quarrels of theologians created an abstract language that gave rise to the scientific world view, leading to technological innovations and the crisis of politics and political form and a shift in authority to the people and the importance of public opinion and development of ways of influencing that opinion. In conclusion we refer to an aphorism of Simone Weil cherished by Miłosz, the poet of distances: distance is the soul of beauty — allowing the individual to perceive reality free from the passions and egoism of the present.

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