

First, there was the person. I met Czesław Miłosz in 1981, shortly after he emerged from near-total obscurity to win the Nobel Prize in Literature at the end of 1980. I was sent to interview him in his Berkeley home by the *New York Times*; eventually, a profile based on the meeting came out in the newspaper's Sunday magazine. The setting was spectacular and incongruous: high up in the Berkeley hills, at the top of a steep road called Grizzly Peak Boulevard, and looking out on the ocean from one side. Both the beauty and the incongruity—of Berkeley, of California, of America itself—were explored repeatedly in his poems and essays. I prepared myself carefully not to act as intimidated as I felt, but there was really no need. There was something about Miłosz that refused homage. Maybe it was his directness, and his frank, youthful vitality. Or perhaps the total lack of pretension with which he talked about himself. He was not overwhelmed by the Nobel—nor did he

underplay its importance. No false modesty, no excessive pride: just a man among men, a person whose task, to which he tirelessly devoted himself, was writing.

I think both the vitality and a sense of measure—moral, intellectual, aesthetic—were the sources and drivers of much of his writing; even, paradoxical as it may seem, his most complex forms of expression and thought. His body of work is huge, both in its scope and variety of genres: he wrote essays, novels, political reflections, autobiography, and, above all, poetry. He translated quantities of poetry from other languages. When I expressed my amazement at the size of his output during that two-day conversation in his Berkeley home, he told me that writing was his work, and he approached it as a worker would his job. He wrote for a certain number of hours (in the morning, as I remember) each day. There was no pretension to anything more romantic, or anguished, or a claim to inspiration. Miłosz disliked pretension of all kinds, and he valued work—honest work, he might have said, work that involved “shaping matter”—greatly; it is one of the themes recurring throughout his writing. Indeed, it is an interesting aspect of his oeuvre that despite its formal variety and inventiveness, there was great consistency of themes and concerns in all the genres

he explored, including the most exceptional, and for him the primary form of poetry. He was not interested in formal experiment for its own sake: he wanted meaning, and he wanted truth; and he derived both, in whatever form, from the ground up, from himself and his own experience, from direct observation and the pressure, the logic, of thought. But then, his experience was vast and his erudition enormous.

When I met Miłosz, he was at a late stage of a long, winding, cross-continental, history-spanning trajectory. A trajectory that in all its aspects—personal, political, intellectual and poetic—was crucially affected by his origins in Lithuania and Poland; that is, in “the Other Europe.” It was also a biographical narrative that, in its geographical progression and some of its thematic concerns, had surprising similarities to my own and that, for me, made his work—particularly in its exilic phases—both a literary and personal illumination. That this should be so is itself of more than personal interest. Across the catastrophic chasm of World War II, Poland remained part of “the Other Europe”—a condition crucial to Miłosz’s perspective that, even in my postwar generation, continued to be a formative fact and a difference that mattered.

I cannot hope, in this short book, to encompass all of Miłosz’s writing, nor would I have the

presumption to try. But I will follow, through his poetry and prose, what for me is Ariadne's thread of a parallel trajectory, hoping it will lead to some insights about this most complex of twentieth-century poets and men.

☞ “I am here.” Thus, the opening sentence of a collection of essays titled *Visions from San Francisco Bay*. A sentence that could not be simpler, but which for Miłosz—as perhaps for many other exiles—would have held dimensions of meaning. A kind of fundamental amazement: How is it that I am here, rather than anywhere else? And what *is* here, what is this bay at which I'm looking, this Berkeley, this California—this America? The rest of this slim but densely perceptive book is an exploration of these questions, in their geographic, cultural, and personal meanings. “The human imagination is spatial,” Miłosz writes in a chapter entitled “Where I Am”; and the significance of place and the conceptual structures shaping our imagination of inner and cosmic space are some of the governing themes within his enormous body of work. Exile—the process of being uprooted from one's original culture, language, political systems, and, crucially for Miłosz, landscapes—sharpens such forms of awareness. It undermines the sense of absoluteness of any one place or

country, a process that is often personally painful but can be very useful for a writer. Being dis-placed gives you a perspective and a point of view. It was perhaps for the advantages of defamiliarization that writers such as Joyce and Beckett chose exile. Miłosz didn't choose it, nor did he court detachment, never mind Romantic or modernist alienation, but his multiple transplantations broadened and deepened his vision beyond most of his contemporaries. "We are not suited to the long perspectives," wrote Phillip Larkin, that quintessentially English poet. But Miłosz came by his telescopic vision naturally, or rather, through the force of circumstance.

Long before exile, there was the place of origin: the Place, to which Miłosz comes back again and again, in poetry and prose, in imagination and memory. "Between the ages of seven and ten I lived in perfect happiness on the farm of my grandparents in Lithuania," Miłosz writes in a late essay titled "Happiness." "It was long ago, and huge oaks and lindens made my fairyland, while orchards allowed me to discover the taste of apples and pears of many species. . . . I lived without yesterday or tomorrow, in the eternal present. This is, precisely, the definition of happiness. . . . It was, I do not hesitate to say, an experience of enchantment with earth

as Paradise. . . . A path in the shade of oaks led down to the river, and my river was never to abandon me throughout my life, wherever fate carried me, even during my years on the far shores of the Pacific.”

Rivers—or perhaps versions of that original river—run throughout Miłosz’s poetry with their ceaseless, Heraclitean flow: “Under various names, I have praised only you, Rivers! / You are milk and honey and love and death and dance,” he writes in a poem called “Rivers” (1980). In “Happiness,” he asks himself if he is mythologizing; he hopes not. He was opposed to all sentimentality and excess, including that of nostalgia. But while exile makes for an almost inevitable detachment from the place of arrival, it often reinforces the primacy, or a kind of absoluteness, of the place one was forced to abandon—the original Place. When you grow up close to the streets and landscapes where you were born, you can observe how they change, sometimes gradually, sometimes more suddenly. You can accept the facts of change—or you can sometimes long for an Elsewhere. But in exile, stored only in memory, one’s original childhood paradise (if you’re lucky enough to have grown up happily) remains unchanged, Edenic. As for rivers—especially those original ones—they seem to hold a special place in the human imagination.

Some, like the Jordan and the Ganges, are considered holy, and many of the earliest cities were built near them for their life-giving power. When I was writing about my own emigration, it was the memory of my childhood rivers that stood for sheer aliveness and pleasure. And it was perhaps not accidental that when I wrote about the discomfiting distance from the second language which all emigrants initially experience, the sense of separation between word and reality was exemplified in the word “river”—which, in English, for a long time failed to evoke an actual river as the Polish word *rzeka* did.

Exile relativizes everything, except, perhaps, the intensity of early memories. It is in his clearly autobiographical novel, *The Issa Valley*, under the guise of a protagonist who is ostensibly not himself, that Miłosz allows himself an almost Nabokovian lyricism of memory. And in his descriptions, he also reveals himself to be a highly knowledgeable naturalist. “In the meadows, the faint whir of snipe, the gabble of blackcock, so like a bubbling on the horizon, and the croaking of frogs (the number of which has something to do with the storks that nest on the rooftops of cottages and barns) are the voices of that season when a sudden thaw gives way to the blossoming of cowslips and daphne—tiny pink and lilac blossoms on bushes as yet without leaves.” So

he writes in the opening pages of *The Issa Valley*, and he goes on to describe a region of superstitions and belief in magic, a place where Christianity still clashed with earlier, pagan beliefs. In other words, an earlier place, not yet touched by industrialization or modern technologies. Miłosz certainly didn't share in the superstitions, but there were qualities of that earlier world, and particularly of peasant life, that he valued—and defended. Attachment to a specific place; closeness to nature; working on a human scale and in a known, familiar community; and above all, working with the land and producing something from it. “Until recently,” he writes, “everything a man needed was manufactured at home.”

An earlier place: even across the great chasm of World War II, the villages of my childhood remained so. That virginal, fast-running river, the thickly wooded forest, riding in hay-filled carts, barefoot kids and peasants singing their wild atonal tunes as they returned from their work in the evening—these are all part of my psychic endowment, and it is clear to me why Miłosz returned to his early memory sites again and again. Is it only for a child that such places hold their enchantment? Or for the visitor from the city, longing to “get back to nature”? For the inhabitants of those villages, their charm couldn't rival

the appeal of modernity, when it eventually began arriving there. In the early 1990s, when I revisited the village where I spent many of my childhood summers, I was aghast to see standard-issue prefab houses standing side by side with the beautifully painted and decorated old wooden dwellings. Then I chastised myself for my aesthetic snobbery. It was understandable why the villagers felt proud of their newly achieved modernity, and I think Miłosz, who was so aware of technological change, with its positive as well as destructive results, would not have begrudged them their newfound comforts.

☒ In his autobiography, *Native Realm*, Miłosz introduces the place from which he came in different terms. Starting with a particular moment and object—“an old chest painted green with red flowers and a similarly painted canopy bed,” which he discovers in an attic of a Swiss home on Lake Geneva and which had been passed on among generations of its inhabitants, through centuries of stability—he goes on to say that in order to explain what this object meant to him, he “would have to go back, arduously, to the very beginning and entangle myself in dates, histories, of institutions, battles and customs” that rendered such continuity impossible. In other words, he would have to explain where he came

from: the Other Europe. “Undoubtedly I could call Europe my home,” he says, “but it was a home that refused to acknowledge itself as a whole; instead, as if on the strength of some self-imposed taboo, it classified its population into two categories: members of the family . . . and poor relations.”

Later, in introducing a chapter called “City of My Youth,” he strikes a note of more explicit resentment on behalf of that underestimated place: “I see an injustice,” he writes. “A Parisian does not have to bring his city out of nothingness every time he wants to describe it. A wealth of allusions lies at his disposal, for his city exists in works of word, brush and chisel. . . . But I, returning in thought to the streets where the most important part of my life unfolded, am obliged to invent the most utilitarian sort of symbols.”

Native Realm could be read as one of the most impersonal autobiographies ever written, but that would be to misunderstand what for Miłosz (as perhaps for all of us, if we were sufficiently cognizant of it) constitutes “the personal.” In a sense, the whole book—and, indeed, much of his oeuvre—is an attempt to evoke and explain to a Western reader the multiple meanings of “the Other Europe”: the realm that defined him and that remained largely unknown, or at best imagined as inferior, obscure, and altogether in-

significant by the inhabitants of what was considered Europe *tout court*: Europe, which stood for civilization itself. In a sense, coming from that “Other” place—and especially with Miłosz’s acute awareness of its marginality—is a position similar to that of an immigrant or an exile: it increases the awareness that our familiar world, our versions of personality, our deepest assumptions about existence, are not the only version of “the human.”

Almost from the beginning, and certainly as he began to travel in his youth, Miłosz was deeply conscious of the extent to which he was shaped by particular circumstances and by impersonal or transpersonal forces: history, language, religion, culture. As it happened, the city in which he grew up—known today as Vilnius—was, during the interwar period, one of the fascinating metropolises of Europe: multinational, multireligious, multilingual, and known then by several slightly different names: Wilno, Vilnius, Wilna. It was also a complicated place to explain. Miłosz was born on June 30, 1911; when he was a child, Vilnius and the bucolic parts of Lithuania he described often in his writing were located within the Russian Empire; before that, they belonged to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, until this formation was partitioned by the neighboring empires in 1795; in 1918, however, Poland regained

its nationhood, and Lithuania declared independence from the new country. But even then, Vilnius remained a city of several religious and ethnic groups—Lithuanian, Jewish, Polish, Belorussian—that coexisted in various states of amity, indifference, and, with the rise of interwar ethno-nationalism, increasing hostility, directed particularly against the Jews. Miłosz came from a Polish-speaking, Polish-identified family that belonged to the minor nobility, and he was initiated into Catholicism early on, through its rituals and traditions, and later through formal education. He was also, from early on, highly aware of the Jewish presence and culture in the city. He knew that Vilnius was known as the “Jerusalem of the north,” for its famous yeshivas and rabbinical scholarship; when he began writing poetry, he was drawn to Jewish groups, because they were largely secular and nonconformist. During one of the anti-Semitic attacks that were becoming more frequent at his university, he was apparently the only one to come to the aid of his fellow Jewish students.

For Miłosz, aside from potent early experiences, aspects of his thought and attitude toward the world were seeded by his formal studies, which he never entirely abandoned. A visitor from western Europe to interwar Vilnius might have been surprised by the high caliber of edu-

cation offered in its schools in the interwar period. Miłosz’s intellectual formation was powerful—and it was the stratum underlying much of his later thought, even as he rebelled against some aspects of it. He engaged in a complicated internal dialogue with the dour teacher who provided his religious instruction in the principles of Catholicism, and who brought to his lessons a dark sense of humor and a propensity to emphasize sins of the flesh. As a fiery, youthfully purist adolescent, Miłosz was particularly repelled by what might be called “organized religion,” and he seethed at the spectacle of “good society” at the Sunday services that pupils in his school had to attend, and the hypocrisy he sensed in its members. He discovered only later, he says, that such feelings were called “hatred of the bourgeoisie”—an attitude he came to reject, together with the idea of judging people on the basis of their group identity.

The intellectual intensity—even anguish—the young Miłosz brought to religious questions was as impressive as the questions he posed (how can cruelty be justified in a God-governed world; why should humans be more important than animals; how is eternity to be understood, given the time line of evolution). But whatever his doubts about the beliefs and practices of formal Catholicism, his conviction that we need a basic morality—

and that the ability to distinguish between right and wrong is what distinguishes human nature from the rest of nature—never abandoned him, and it led him to grapple with questions of faith, and its collective loss, throughout his long life. He was attracted early on to the “heresies” he studied in a church manual—especially Manicheanism, in which the polarity between good and evil was attributed to human choice, rather than higher forces. Indeed, one of Miłosz’s objections to formal Catholicism—at least as it was taught during his high school years—was that its morality was collective rather than individual and that it did not foster a sense of responsibility toward particular people. This was perhaps particularly true of Polish Catholicism, which, he notes, was closely entangled with national identity, especially after Poland was partitioned in the last quarter of the eighteenth century and ceased to exist as a country for almost a 150 years. The question of the Other Europe has a long historical derivation.

Yet while his education led Miłosz to wrestle with questions of human ethics, it is one of the interesting revelations of his autobiography that, during his high school years, he was “drawn to the science laboratory, with its modern microscopes, as to a workshop of learning that was the least abstract because it related to my experiences

of hunting and walking in the forest.” While still in high school, he delivered a talk on Darwin and natural selection, and among all his religious and intellectual doubts, he says he had “no doubts about one thing: my future profession of naturalist was settled.”

Of course, it wasn’t settled at all—but much of his poetry springs from his love of nature and is permeated by his close knowledge of it. In addition, Miłosz’s Vilnius education included elements more directly relevant to the practice of poetry. His training in Latin classics and translation instilled in him a basic but crucial lesson that “what one says changes, depending upon how one says it,” and also the hard-earned conviction, conveyed by a demanding teacher, that “perfection is worth the effort . . . in other words, he showed us how to respect literature as the fruit of arduous labor.” To see writing as arduous labor, rather than an outpouring of some creative genius, would have appealed to Miłosz greatly; the value of such labor is one of the threads that runs through all his writing. “Bureaucracy is parasitic because its activities are unproductive,” he observed caustically about his brief prewar period of office work. “They do not shape matter.” And he went on to say, “The peasant is honest because his energy is transformed into bread. The artisan is honest because he makes over wood,

hide, or metal.” The energy of labor is what converts stone into cathedrals, plants into food, steel into bridges, perceptions into understanding—and words into poetry.

Other leitmotifs that make their appearance in his student years can be traced throughout his work. He tells us that for his final high school examination, he wrote an essay on the “river of time,” for which, he adds in a rare note of self-praise, “my paper received the highest mark.” His reasons for choosing the subject were highly philosophical. “I was stirred by the mystery of universal movement,” he says, “where all things are linked together, are interdependent, create one another, transcend one another, where nothing conforms to rigid definitions.” For a high school senior, this is a sophisticated and, indeed, a prescient idea, which scientists continue to grapple with today. In Miłosz’s work, “movement”—of history, of the cosmos, of nature and evolution, of technological development, and, above all, of human time—becomes one of the deep themes woven into the fabric of both his poetic and essayistic reflections. Here’s an early poem called “Encounter,” written in Vilnius in 1936:

We were riding through frozen fields in a
wagon at dawn.
A red wing rose in the darkness.

And suddenly a hare ran across the road.
One of us pointed to it with his hand.

That was long ago. Today neither of them is
alive,
Not the hare, nor the man who made the
gesture.

O my love, where are they, where are they
going
The flash of a hand, streak of movement,
rustle of pebbles.
I ask not out of sorrow, but in wonder.

A moment; a streak of movement; and the sheer poignancy—and wonder—of ordinary loss, of passing moments, the passage of time itself. Such motifs will recur throughout his poetry, although later they will become inflected by much darker contexts.

After that early intention to become a naturalist, however, Miłosz did not arrive at a poetic vocation immediately. It was perhaps part of his attempt to maintain an inner balance—not to indulge his inclinations or ambitions too easily—that in college, despite his already strong literary proclivities, he studied law. “If I rightly understand the motives for my choice,” he says, “I was guided by an exaggerated fear that if I revealed what I wanted to become too early, I would bring

down defeat upon myself.” Perhaps to declare himself “a poet” might have seemed presumptuous and pretentious. “At the same time,” he adds, “some instinct whispered that literature should not feed on itself but should be supported by a knowledge of society.” That instinct enriched all his writing, and when he was still a student, it may have accounted for his ambivalent attraction to aspects of Marxism—as well as his eventual repulsion against its rigidities. During his university years, groups of all political stripes were active among students in Vilnius, and their politics were taken seriously. This was a period when students not only discussed politics but participated in them. Miłosz wasn’t wholeheartedly drawn to any of the groups, but for a young person of temperamentally liberal inclinations at a time of rising right-wing extremism, Marxism was the preferable—really, the default—option. It was also unavoidable: in the air, part of the climate of opinion. Miłosz, with his complicated view of Russian sensibility (he thought Russian poetry was too musical by half) and his more concrete suspicions of rising Soviet communism, was not a natural recruit for Marxist activism; yet, interestingly, he was also afraid of a tendency in himself, which a critic of his early student poems called his desire “to keep clean hands.” In other words, young Miłosz understood that a de-

sire for moral purity which led to avoidance of action and commitment could also be a moral fault.

For a while, Miłosz tried participating in a Marxist group and “bellowed” rousing speeches. Eventually, however, he revolted against the sloganeering simplifications of Marxist student politics and the need to falsify himself in order to profess its beliefs. At the same time, he never lost his need for large frameworks of perception and understanding—for a morality and a metaphysics; and as he turned from politics to poetry, he developed what might be called a metaphysics of particularity. The sources of meaning, he felt, are to be found in particular attachments and perceptions. But the need to understand one person or creature fully leads, in turn, to questions about the underpinnings of life: the riddle of consciousness, the sources of happiness, why anything is rather than otherwise; and it seems to me that this double movement gives much of his poetry its unique combination of sensuous vividness and sometimes austere, cerebral music—the music of thought.

Perhaps what Miłosz was really abandoning as he turned away from Marxism was the lure of ideological systems altogether. Instead, he joined the poetic circles in Vilnius that were, to his pleasure, nonconformist and multicultural; the

presence of Jewish poets in these groupings was something he particularly enjoyed. Miłosz’s affinity for Jewish culture—perhaps for Jewish nonnationalist sensibility—was clearly authentic and expressed itself in many ways: in his friendships, in his poetry, and eventually in learning Hebrew so that he could translate the Old Testament. Nevertheless, in *Native Realm*, he says that writing about the Jewish population of Vilnius in retrospect is “hard” for him, “because no small effort is demanded if one is to distinguish these pre-war tensions from one of the greatest tragedies of history: the slaughter of some three million ‘non-Aryan’ Polish citizens by the Nazis.” His account of interethnic relations in prewar Vilnius—and particularly the prevailing attitudes toward the Jewish part of the population—sometimes shows signs of that anguish; but it is also an impressive attempt to do justice, as much as possible in a few compressed pages, to all the groups and their collective attitudes, in what was then an uneasily multicultural society. He fully acknowledges the strong strain of anti-Semitism among the Catholic, highly nationalistic Poles, and its sources not only in prejudice but in sheer ignorance and a comprehensive misunderstanding of Jewish culture and sensibility. The misunderstandings extended especially to the newly secularized, middle-class Jews who, in contrast

to Orthodox Jews, with their particular garb and use of Yiddish or Hebrew, were almost indistinguishable from their Polish counterparts. (Among Poland's newly secularized Jewish population were, quite astoundingly, several of the country's leading poets.)

But in his account of cross-ethnic relations, Miłosz also conscientiously notes elements of Jewish attitudes that constituted a kind of provocation: the pro-Russian or pro-Soviet tendencies quite prevalent among younger Jews; economic as well as intellectual and professional competition between two poor populations, which allowed some Jewish businessmen to thrive rather more than their non-Jewish counterparts; and, in another vein, the disproportionate predominance of Jewish students at some universities, especially in the fields of law and medicine.

I can only admire Miłosz's sensitivity and his courage in writing about such matters. The awareness of the Holocaust, so present for him, makes it indeed extremely difficult to speak about the Polish-Jewish relations that preceded it from any perspective, including a Jewish one—as I discovered when I wrote on this subject myself, from my more “legitimate” position as the daughter of Holocaust survivors. Our knowledge of the terrible culmination is hard to disentangle from what went

on before. But history is not like story, leading to a predetermined end; and there is perhaps no history more complex—or more fascinating—than that of Polish Jews and of Polish-Jewish relations during the long centuries of their co-existence. Beginning with the eleventh century, Poland had the largest Jewish population of any country in Europe and the largest percentage of Jewish inhabitants in the world. It also presented all the varieties of what was really multiculturalism *avant la lettre*, with phases of amity and enmity, of virtual self-governance for the Jewish minority, and fierce prejudice against it. It is a history that until recently was almost entirely unknown in the Western world and remains a poorly understood and highly contentious subject even today.

☞ Eventually, Miłosz acquired knowledge of society and its workings in the most informative and most demanding way: through direct experience. But his early poetry also emerged from a different and very potent source—an attitude, or a complex of feelings and sensations he referred to as “pansexuality”; that is, an avid, powerful attraction to all forms of life, to nature, humans, places, landscapes. “My erotic desire went further than any object,” he writes. “My pansexuality included the whole world and, not

able to be a god or an ogre who swallows the world, tastes it with his tongue, bites, I could only take it in an embrace with my eyes. Besides, like all hungers, this one disperses, too, at the limit of words.”

A limit he tries again and again to break through precisely in words, and through words. Especially, of course, in poetry, which can do more than describe the object itself; it can express the hunger Miłosz felt and the compelling sensuality of the visible world.

“Pansexuality,” with its wonder at the actually existing, Edenic world, was also a philosophy of specificity rather than generalization; the conviction that meaning resides in—or, rather, begins with—what Miłosz eventually called “the immense call of the Particular”: the singular person, the domestic, mundane detail, the momentary encounter, the ordinary and the concrete. This was a conviction that never deserted him and that, together with the immense cargo of knowledge he carried within himself, gives his poetry, through the many dramatic changes of circumstance in his life, its inexhaustible fuel and its understated, complex music: the music of wonder and of thought.

✠ Between student years and exile, and before the great and grim lessons of History, there was,

for Miłosz, exploration of the actually existing world—particularly the part of it that to a large extent then stood for “the World” itself: western Europe.

The early 1930s were, for Miłosz and his friends, a time of adventurous student journeys, by train (a “dishonest” method of transport) and canoe (honest, but at times very dangerous). In 1931 he embarked on such a journey with two fellow members of the “Vagabonds Club,” nicknamed Robespierre and Elephant. (Interestingly, the habit of giving nicknames to close friends persists in Poland till today. I’m not sure I have an explanation for this cultural epiphenomenon—but perhaps it is an expression of the playful intimacy that has always been part of the Polish ethos of friendship and has persisted despite and within all the larger conflicts.) Such personal details aside, Miłosz was clearly very aware, as he set out on his westward trip, that he was coming from a part of the world seen (if it was seen at all) as less civilized, less cultured, less advanced in every way.

Moreover, despite his deep attachment to the regions of his childhood and youth, Miłosz to some extent shared this preconception, and his discovery of the West was a complex education. As the three friends begin their journey in the nearest country of Czechoslovakia, he admires

the cleanliness and neatness of its small towns and the liveliness of Prague, even then thronged by tourists—“the first Western European capital I saw,” he writes. (The fact that he places Czechoslovakia in the West prefigures later arguments about nomenclature, and the claim—put forward most passionately by Milan Kundera—that several countries of the Other Europe should be seen as belonging to “central” as opposed to “eastern” Europe.)

But on that prewar journey, there were also more startling, and more disillusioning, moments. On a bridge near the French border, the three friends saw a sign raised up so as to be easily visible to various unwary travelers, which “prohibited Gypsies, Poles, Rumanians, and Bulgarians from entering the country.” “France, our spiritual sister, welcomed us,” Miłosz comments ironically. One can imagine the young explorers’ shock; indeed, even in long retrospect, such crude expressions of bigotry don’t fit into the idea of France, which for so many stood for civilization itself. Was this a reaction against the influx of immigrants in great numbers? The 1930s—the years of the Great Depression—were also a decade of mass migrations from eastern to western Europe, in an era before the Iron Curtain made such border crossings virtually impossible; and this spawned its share of

extreme reactions, including the rise of fascism—however indiscernible it might have been from afar.

Nevertheless, even after this disconcerting beginning, the three young travelers fell into a state of full enchantment once they reached Paris. Mind you, who could help it? The first encounter with that city has stunned many into helpless aesthetic submission.

Miłosz stayed in Paris for a year, studying on a scholarship arranged by a distinguished if distant relative, Oscar de Lubicz Miłosz, a diplomat and poet who was also a Swedenborgian mystic, and who remained a powerful and formative influence on his young protégé throughout his life.

During that initial sojourn, Miłosz came to admire France not only for the beauty of its architecture or the palpable presence of the past in its cities, but also for its love of individual freedom and the respect for privacy that allowed people to live out their lives as they wished. Coming from a culture where the price of closer human relations was a greater intrusiveness, young Miłosz might well have wanted such freedom for himself. Indeed, in his writing, where he could exercise control over what he wanted to reveal and conceal, he protected his privacy quite punctiliously for many years.

But in France itself, as their stay went on, Miłosz and his travel companions became painfully aware of the dramatic social contrasts prevailing there, and the indifference, behind those privately closed doors, to the suffering of others—especially the “tragic mass” of the impoverished and the unemployed, among whom migrant Poles were very prominent. “We were sensitive to the smell of misery and brutality,” Miłosz writes, and he returns to the theme in a moving poem called “Ballad of Levallois,” whose rare explanatory subtitle notes that it refers to “barracks for the unemployed, Levallois-Perret, 1935”:

O God, have mercy on Levallois,
Look under these chestnut trees poisoned
with smoke,
Give a moment of joy to the weak and the
drunk,
O God, have mercy on Levallois. . . .

All day long they stole and cursed,
Now they lie in their bunks and lick their
wounds,
And while the darkness thickens over Paris
They hide their faces in their thieving
hands.
O God, have mercy on Levallois. . . .

It was they who lifted you above themselves,
Their hands sculpted your face.
So deign to look on your faithful priests,
Give them the joys of table and bed.

The poem springs from the same source as the later prose observations on this subject in *Native Realm*, but in “Ballad,” the sense of outrage young Miłosz felt at the misery he saw in France is heightened both by the understated lyricism of the verse and the sacrilegious form of the prayer—a defiant appeal to God on behalf of the drunk, the thieving, the utterly miserable, and the worker-priests who sculpted the many beautiful images of divinity in Paris’s cathedrals. Miłosz’s sensitivity to human misery was indeed deep, and his enchantment with the magical West didn’t entirely survive, or was at least greatly modified by that first, youthful encounter with its actualities.

☒ Miłosz returned to France much later, in very different circumstances—and his first response was a newly inflected sense of wonder. “Today, the most amazing thing about Paris for me is that it still exists,” he wrote in the late 1950s.

Undoubtedly, this perhaps surprising sense of surprise also derives from Miłosz’s vantage point in the Other Europe. Between his very different

sojourns in Paris, there was the Event that changed everything, changed it utterly, and that bisected the entire twentieth century into “before” and “after.” This was, of course, World War II, and while this global conflict had awful consequences for all the countries of Europe, it was particularly cruel in the eastern parts of it—and most catastrophically destructive in Poland itself. Between 1939 and 1945, Poland was the epicenter not of one but two violent upheavals: the Nazi war of occupation and conquest against the Poles, during which three million people lost their lives; and the project of extermination directed against the Jews, and perpetrated largely on Polish territory, in which three million Polish Jews, or 90 percent of the prewar Jewish population of Poland, were murdered. And while Paris was physically saved by the Vichy government’s collusion with the Germans, the Nazi invasion and occupation of Poland reduced Warsaw to rubble and ruin, killing, among all those unbearable, anonymous numbers, many of Miłosz’s friends.

Miłosz lived through most of the hellish years in Warsaw—that is, in one of the inferno’s deepest circles. His movements at the beginning of the conflict were complicated, but shortly after the bombardment of Warsaw at the outbreak of the war, he decided, together with many others, to escape eastward, out of the zone of greatest

danger, and make his way to the Ukrainian city of Lviv (as it is now known). This is what he writes in *Native Realm* about one of the revelations brought about by that experience: “I could reduce all that happened to me then to a few things. Lying in the field near a highway bombarded by airplanes, I riveted my eyes on a stone and two blades of grass in front of me. Listening to the whistle of a bomb, I suddenly understood the value of matter: that stone and those two blades of grass formed a whole kingdom, an infinity of forms, shades, textures, lights. They were the universe. I had always refused to accept the division into macro- and micro-cosmos; I preferred to contemplate a piece of bark or a bird’s wing rather than sunsets or sunrises. But now I saw into the depths of matter with exceptional intensity.”

The epiphany is of course consistent with his entire vision: his desire to grasp the essence of things; his belief that meaning inheres in the concrete and the particular and proceeds from it to deeper understanding. But given the circumstances in which it takes place, his description of the terrifying experience is almost eerily impersonal. Perhaps it is possible to understand his detachment as something that happens in moments of great danger: a kind of absenting of