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Preface

Ever since I was a young girl I have been fascinated by Polish literature. I started to write poems when I was in grade school, and when I was in high school my first poems appeared in the Polish-language edition of the Jewish newspaper in Warsaw. Soon afterward, my poems were also published in Szczecin, where my family lived after World War II, and occasionally in Poznań. I received my first poetry award when I was still in high school. It was the time of the "Thaw" and many new artistic clubs were being formed in our city. I was invited to a club that had been organized by artists and poets. A young painter had cleared out his cellar and built a small podium from where we would read our work. My father donated a coal heater, and eventually our meetings and activities became quite well known, and the city radio station ran a program about us. Because I was still a high-school student, I had to be home before curfew, and could not walk in the evenings alone, so every night one of the poets would walk me home.

Initially, I did not tell anyone about my literary attempts when I was at Warsaw University. A few years later a couple of my closer friends shared my secret and I was invited to join the group Forum Poetów (Poets' Forum), which functioned under the umbrella of Warsaw's well-known Klub Hybrydy. Soon the political turmoil of 1968 was upon us and we were pressured by the virulent anti-Semitic campaign to emigrate. To the very end, my poet friends remained loyal and dedicated to me, they came to see me off at the station, even though they knew they might be photographed by the security services. And my poems appeared in the club's publication after my departure. Since my name was unknown to the censorship, they slipped by unnoticed. I still meet some of these friends on my visits to Warsaw.

In Poland I graduated with a master's degree in philology from Warsaw University, after which I attended Professor Janina Kulczycka-Saloni's postgraduate seminar and worked a few years as a journalist and editor at a magazine for the blind. When I was forced to leave my homeland in 1969, one of the causes of my exilic trauma was the fear that I would never be able to resume working in my field of expertise, the field that I loved. Graduate study in New York University's Slavic Department, where I defended my dissertation in Russian literature, significantly broadened my perspective on literature and literary research, and consequently opened up for me the possibility of teaching Polish language and literature at an American university, in my case the Department of Slavic Languages at Columbia University.

Zoya Yurieff, my adviser at NYU, inspired me and opened up for me opportunities of which I could not even dream. She had read my poems in the major Polish émigré magazine based in London, and at our first chance encounter she told me that my place was in the university, that I should apply to graduate school, and she would write me a letter of recommendation. Years later, after I had finished my graduate coursework, she came up with the idea for the topic of my dissertation. Knowing that I had spent seven months in Rome waiting for my visa to the United States, she suggested that I examine the Roman theme in Russian Symbolist poetry. During the process of working on my dissertation I had the opportunity to publish two chapters in collections in honor of my mentor Zoya Yurieff and Wojciech Skalmowski, Professor at the Catholic University of Leuven (Belgium).

My essay "The Scepter of the Far East and the Crown of the Third Rome in the Mirror of Russian Poetry" is a byproduct of my dissertation. More than a decade after defending my dissertation, I responded to the call of Hebrew University to participate in the international conference, "The Memory and Significance of the Russo-Japanese War from the Centennial Perspective" (2004). I realized that many of the symbols and metaphors I had come across in my research served as covert means of expressing the postwar national trauma. I reexamined the material from that focus and presented it at the conference. It was subsequently published in the volume of conference proceedings.[1]

My dissertation was published as *The Legacy of Ancient Rome in the Russian Silver Age* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007). My friend, mentor, and Columbia colleague, Professor Robert Maguire, introduced me to Ronald Meyer, editor at the Harriman Institute, and encouraged him to edit my immigrant's English and publish the book in Studies of the Harriman Institute. For the last two decades all my texts in English have been edited by Dr. Meyer.

Attending conferences and conventions inspired me to organize panels and conferences on Polish literature at the university or Polish scholarly associations in New York. In these initiatives I could always count on the support of Professors Robert Maguire and Robert Belknap, both of whom had knowledge and appreciation of Polish literature and culture. The 1996 conference dedicated to the legacy of the prominent Polish writer Józef Wittlin was one such event. Both eminent professors not only shared their expertise, but they also agreed to participate. In my essay for this conference I compared two novels written over quite a large span of time, the first by Józef Wittlin and the second by Albert Camus. Both novels concern the tragic experiences of young men who fought in the First World War. I immediately recognized that these two young men, one born in Ukraine and the other in Algeria, represented the tragic generation of unknown soldiers.

That same year I was asked to prepare an event for the Manhattan Theater Club, dedicated to the poetry of Wisława Szymborska, who had been shortlisted for the Nobel Prize, which she received later that year. Preparations for that evening occasioned my

1 *Rethinking the Russo-Japanese War, 1904–5. Centennial Perspectives*, ed. Rotem Kowner (Folkestone: Global Oriental, 2007), 232–44.

deeper interest in Szymborska's poetry and my personal contact with the poet and our friendship. My study of Szymborska's poetry resulted in another comparative text, "The Ghost of Shakespeare," which examines the significance of Shakespearean icons in twentieth-century literature. A close reading of Choromański's novel *Jealousy and Medicine* inspired me to examine the model for this novel of jealousy, and I realized that the ghost of Othello hovers over Choromański's work as well.

Even though I never specialized in comparative literature, I have always been attracted to the comparative aspect of literary analysis. I find that approach appealing and useful both in teaching language and literature, and when writing about literature. Investigating the interplay between the structures of literary texts became one of my fascinations. As George Steiner has written, "From their inception, literary studies and the arts of interpretation have been comparative."[2] In this collection the reader will find this approach or method in my essays "Two Unknown Soldiers," "Jealousy, Sex and Character: Michał Choromański and Otto Weininger," "The Ghost of Shakespeare in Szymborska," and, to a lesser extent, in some others as well.

Most of the essays in this collection were researched and written as a response to a call for papers: a scholarly conference, the International Biennial of Poetry in Liége, or the meetings of the International PEN Centre for Writers in Exile, of which I was a board member and later acting president. In addition, there are sketches about literary figures, some of whom I have had the honor to known personally, for example, Czesław Miłosz, Wisława Szymborska, Jerzy Ficowski, Bronisław Przyłuski, and Vasyl Makhno. The book ends with a selection from my autobiographical writings. Each of these texts demanded a different approach, and a different level of academic or literary discourse. They were all written, however, with my profound engagement and a desire to make my own contribution to the subject at hand.

I am deeply indebted to my friend Ronald Meyer for his encouragement, help and editorship; to Academic Studies Press for so graciously taking on this project; and to the Harriman Institute, Columbia University, for its sponsorship of the publication.

—Anna Frajlich

2 George Steiner, "What Is Comparative Literature," in his *No Passion Spent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 144.

Part One

On Poetry

1

Czesław Miłosz: The Ambivalent Landscape of Return

In 1951, when Czesław Miłosz, then the first secretary at the Paris Embassy of the People's Republic of Poland, asked the French government for political asylum, my generation was just starting primary school. For us, Miłosz's step meant that we would not find his poems in our textbooks alongside the poems of other contemporary writers, nor would his essays appear in the literary magazines. The poet himself at that time considered his step suicide, which fact he stated in the manifesto published in the Parisbased émigré monthly *Kultura*, his only publisher during the decades of his exile.

In the mid-1960s, in order to read one of Miłosz's books for my master's thesis at Warsaw University, I had to obtain written permission from my advisor to gain access to this book, which had been placed in the National Library's *prohibita.* To this day I remember my long trips by streetcar to the library, located quite a distance from the university. The university library did not even own the book in question.

The Nobel Prize awarded to Miłosz in 1980 forced the powers-that-be in Poland to acknowledge his existence. Poetry readings and book exhibits were organized. Having left Poland ten years earlier as a political refugee, I asked a friend what constituted such an exhibit? "Mainly anthologies opened to the pages where his poems or translations were printed," was the reply.

Today Miłosz is a major figure on the international literary map. He resides half of each year in Kraków, Poland, and the other half in Berkeley, California, his domicile since 1960. Nineteen years after his Nobel award, there is not a single topic concerning his literary and/or philosophic writings that has not been examined, retold in interviews, analyzed in master's theses and doctoral dissertations, or illustrated with photographs, maps, and indexes.

"I am a rotary prophet, I disappear and come back," Miłosz said during the interview for Radio Free Europe which I conducted with him following his receipt of the

Nobel Prize. At the time, he was not at all eager to grant this interview, for Radio Free Europe, like almost everyone else, from left to right, had given him the cold shoulder thirty years earlier. Nevertheless, he granted the interview. He seemed to have dropped the grudge against his colleagues in Poland, who had branded him a traitor after he, faced with the unrelenting Stalinization of Polish literature, chose exile. Now he had returned. Return, among such other major topoi as journeying and exile, has permeated his writing throughout.

Not everyone recognizes return as a valid topos of Miłosz's poetry. Bogdana Carpenter, in her excellent essay "Czesław Miłosz and Zbigniew Herbert: The Poet of Exile and the Poet of Return,"[1] associates Miłosz only with the theme of exile and not of return. Until the political changes of 1989, with the world roughly divided into two parts, the communist realm and the free world, return was mainly, if not exclusively, associated with political choices, and the political choice was considered a moral one; some viewed as heroic the act of exile, some the act of return. The strategies of return and nonreturn concerned this set of choices. Miłosz's political act prevented him from returning and spared or denied him the anguish associated with such decision-making. Nevertheless, the topic of return has always been present in Miłosz's poetry, an awareness of its ambivalence notwithstanding, reinforced by the fact that on occasion he felt as if, as he expressed in a poem written in Berkeley in 1963, "I have never left you, my city."

From the point of view of its symbolism "the return home, or the return to the material home or to the motherland or birthplace, is symbolic of death, not in the sense of total destruction but of reintegration of the spirit into the Spirit."[2] At the same time, the return as an opposite state of navigating—namely, transcending—is a "mystic idea analogous to the mystery of the 'fall' of the soul into the material plane of existence (by the process of involution) and to the necessity of its returning to the starting point, a mystery which has been expounded by Platonic idealism and by Plotinus in particular. This law of the returning soul corresponds to the belief in the concept of a 'closed' universe (like that of the Eternal Return) or the conception of all phenomena as a cyclic organization."[3]

In a book-length interview conducted by Aleksander Fiut, Miłosz says: "There were various returns of mine to Wilna even before 1939."[4] It was then that his meditation on the topic began. The strong resolution to return expressed in the poem "Hymn" (1935)—"I, a faithful son of earth, shall return to the black earth"[5]—coincided with the equally strong premonition of nonreturn expressed in the poem "In My Native Land," written in Warsaw in 1937, which begins: "In my homeland to which I will not return."[6]

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1 Bogdana Carpenter, "Czesław Miłosz i Zbigniew Herbert: Poeta wygnania i poeta powrotu," in *Literatura polska na obczyźnie: Prace Kongresu Kultury Polskiej*, ed. Józef Bujnowski (London: Kongres Kultury Polskiej na Obczyźnie, 1985), 176–92.

2 J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, tr. Jack Sage (New York: Philosophical Library, 1962), 261.

3 Ibid., 281.

4 Aleksander Fiut, *Czesława Miłosza autoportret przekorny* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1994), 276.

5 Czesław Miłosz, "Hymn," tr. by the author, in his *Collected Poems* (New York: Ecco, 1988), 13.

6 Czesław Miłosz, *Utwory poetyckie / Poems* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1988), 41. The translation here is my own.

At that time Miłosz, dismissed from his position at the radio station in Wilno (Vilnius) for his political views, eventually accepted a position at the more liberal Warsaw Radio. He considered this transfer, caused by the growing tension in the political climate of the thirties, his first exile.

Miłosz has spent much of his life after World War II abroad, first in diplomatic service, then as an exile. Unable to return physically, the poet carried out many imaginary returns which fulfilled the function of a real return, that of a spiritual renewal. In the early thirties Miłosz translated several poems by the English metaphysical poet Thomas Traherne, among them "The Return." In the introduction to a 1986 collection of his translations, he offers an explanation: "The question: whence here the English metaphysical poet of the seventeenth century, Thomas Traherne? The answer: unknown until then in France, he found the translator there. *Cahiers du Sud*, perhaps the best French literary magazine, published in Marseilles in two languages, and at that time I already possessed some elementary English."[7] The poetry of Traherne, discovered only at the turn of this century, is being placed, with some occasional reservations, alongside other metaphysical poets such as Herbert, Crashaw, Vaughan, and Donne. In his conversations with Ewa Czarnecka and Aleksander Fiut, Miłosz underlines the significance of this encounter, and later acknowledges his indebtedness to Traherne, especially to the latter's "Poems of Felicity" as the inspiration for his wartime poem "The World."[8] In his book of essays *Ogród nauk* (The Garden of Knowledge, 1979) Miłosz dedicated an entire essay to his encounter with Traherne's poetry.

"The Return," one of the two opening poems in the cycle "Poems of Felicity," introduces several topics pertinent to the entire cycle, among them a sense of the infant's mystical harmony with God and nature,[9] the repetition of spherical imagery,[10] innocent clarity and the belief that the "celestial store" within the memory can be recovered.[11] The poem "represents the meditation on a state of childhood in order to find the true original nature of man and the world."[12] This is possible because of the intuition of childhood and the attribution to the newborn of the mystical experience of

7 Czesław Miłosz, *Mowa wiązana* (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1986), 5. (The thirties, according to Miłosz, marked the beginning of attraction toward things English, thus replacing to an extent French as the predominant Western cultural model.)

8 Cf. Czesław Miłosz, *Ogród nauk* [The Garden of Knowledge] (Paris, 1979), 39–44; Ewa Czarnecka and Aleksander Fiut, *Conversations with Czesław Miłosz*, tr. Richard Lourie (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987), 127.

9 Franz K. Wohrer, *Thomas Traherne: The Growth of a Mystic Mind* (Salzburg: University of Salzburg, 1982), 101.

10 Stanley Stewart, *The Expanded Voice: The Art of Thomas Traherne* (San Marino, CA: The Huntington Library, 1970), 159, 166.

11 Louis L. Martz, *The Paradise Within: Studies in Vaughan, Traherne, and Milton* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964);

12 Richard Jordan, *The Temple of Eternity: Thomas Traherne's Philosophy of Time* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1972).

his adulthood. Therefore, "the perfect life" is seen as "a circular journey from childhood to childhood."[13]

To infancy, O Lord, again I come,
That I my manhood may improve:

My early tutor is the womb;
I still my cradle love.

'Tis strange that I should wisest be,
When least I could an Error see.

Beautifully translated in a contemporary Polish idiom, "The Return" may have set the pattern for some of Miłosz's own "returns" written during the following decades, as he confronted his comings and goings, both real and imaginary, his actual returns to his native Lithuania from his sojourns to Warsaw and Paris, his long exile, and his trips back in the nineties when he was eventually able to visit freely the provinces of his childhood. Throughout Miłosz's entire creative life, the desire to return, the fear of not being able to do so, the confrontation of his soothing native landscape, and the painful landscape of exile account for the immense tension and depth of his poetry.

The first cycle of poems in which Miłosz conscientiously employed Traherne's ideal of return is "The World," written in 1943. After having given testimony to one of the most cruel spectacles the world has ever seen—the liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto—in his poem "Campo dei Fiori," Miłosz succumbs to his desire to recreate the universe in its intact form, to learn from the "womb," from the world that has given him life and wisdom. It is not only the naive worldview that he venerates at history's darkest hour, but also the functionality of seeing in a somewhat Trahernean mode, through "spheric perspective." His world is flat, and everything could be seen at once. As Aleksander Fiut points out: "The word *see* takes on further meanings. For Miłosz it refers not only to ordinary perception or intense imagining of past events but also to the ability to penetrate beneath the surface of phenomena in order to reach the meaning that is veiled to the uninitiated eye."[14] In one poem Miłosz writes about the traveler who upon his return wants "To see, purely and simply, without name, / Without expectations, fears, or hopes, / At the edge where there is no I or not-I."[15]

Miłosz's own first poem titled "The Return," written in 1935 in Paris and published in his wartime collection *Ocalenie* (Rescue, 1945), projects the "visionary-imaginative landscape typical of Miłosz's poetry until 1943" and uses the "vocabulary

13 Allison J. Sherrington, *Mystical Symbolism in the Poetry of Thomas Traherne* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1970), 70–72.

14 Aleksander Fiut, *The Eternal Moment: The Poetry of Czesław Miłosz*, tr. Theodosia S. Robertson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 5. Cf. also the significance of the eye (7) and the fact that, as always, "the poet is groping for the strong expressiveness of the image" (10).

15 Czesław Miłosz, "This Only," tr. Czesław Miłosz and Robert Hass, in *Collected Poems*, 450.

of catastrophic imagery."[16] If one were to apply the interesting classification offered in Tony Tanner's book *Scenes of Nature, Signs of Men*,[17] there is a definite prevalence of signs over scenes. In his book Tanner examines the differences in perception of landscape in the European and American poetic traditions. The European landscape, according to Tanner, offers to onlookers both scenes of nature and immediately recognizable signs of man—that is, the cultural tradition. These differences account for the reciprocal relation between poet and landscape in European literature and the one-sided relation in American poetry, where the poet faces a vast space and encounters difficulty in attaching himself to it; hence the loneliness and soliloquial character of his poetry. "The Return," excluded by Miłosz from his latest selection, is densely symbolic. The friends are supposed to meet at the great river, but the encounter is disrupted by an undisclosed imminent danger. (The great river in Miłosz's poem at which the unspecified friends are supposed to meet initiates one of the most powerful recurrent images in Miłosz's verse.)[18] It is, rather, an unconsummated confrontation. The return becomes a "nonreturn," the golden tables are to be covered with the mourning shroud, the assembled friends are to await the destruction of Nineveh.

Later, Miłosz's premonition of nonreturn finds its expression in a poem written in 1937 in Warsaw, titled "In My Homeland." The poet evokes the image of a vast forest lake, shallow and dark, full of sharpedged weeds. This evocation, associated with the impossibility of return, contains both splendor and his great fear. Miłosz extracts all the potential from this powerful image, impressing upon the reader the full range of the symbol of the lake in its destructive and fatalistic sense, as well as in its revelatory and cleansing aspect. The image of the lake in Polish literature is very closely associated with Lithuania, ever since the greatest Polish Romantic poet, Adam Mickiewicz, a native of Lithuania, introduced the aquatic landscape into Polish poetry at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Later, in his collection *Facing the River*, Miłosz will refer to a naiad from Mickiewicz's ballad "I Love It."[19]

In New York in 1946, while working at the Polish Consulate, Miłosz wrote the eight-part poem "Child of Europe," where the image of the lake in its revelatory function again is associated with the grim prospect of return: "Do not gaze into the pools [lakes] of the past / Their corroded surface will mirror / A face different from the one you expected."[20] The lake will return in numerous poems, including the "Elegy to

16 Fiut, *The Eternal Moment,* 11, 30.

17 Tonny Tanner, *Scenes of Nature, Signs of Man* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). I wish to thank Professor Robert A. Maguire for recommending this book to me.

18 Cf. the titles of Miłosz's poems that include the word *river*, among them "Rivers," "Slow River," and "Rivers Grow Small." In his collection *Facing the River*, in the poem "Capri," Miłosz writes: "I bless you, rivers, I pronounce your names in the way my mother pronounced them, with respect and yet tenderly" (Czesław Miłosz, *Facing the River*, tr. by the author and Robert Hass [New York: Ecco, 1995], 10). Cf. also the title of Miłosz's novel *The Issa Valley*, which refers to the Issa River.

19 Miłosz, *Facing the River*, 19.

20 Miłosz, *Collected Poems*, 88.

N.N.," written decades later (in 1963), with its shattering realization that "One cannot step twice into the same lake."[21]

With the passing of time, the imaginary travels to his homeland became Miłosz's primary mission. Entire cycles of poems such as "From the Rising of the Sun," "Provinces," and "City Without a Name," and essay collections such as *Beginning with My Streets* and *Native Realm,* among others, are dedicated to the evocation of manors, estates, places, streets, nooks, and corners—or, to quote Tony Tanner, "the scenes of nature and the signs of man." Miłosz made use of old German military maps to ensure accuracy and quoted from old Lithuanian encyclopedias as well as from the memoirs of his countrymen. He never tired of naming, locating, and explaining the geographic, historical, and social parameters of a small community from the country of his childhood and youth.[22] The poet claims that he inherited this passion from his kinsman, the prominent French poet Oscar Miłosz, but his sense of mission also sprang from the belief that he was the only one capable of preserving them—that is, returning them to their rightful place forever.

"Who is going to reproach me for lack of precision, who would recognize the places or the people? My power is absolute, everything there belongs to one man now, who once, a student from Wilno, arrived there in a dogcart."[23] This sense of obligation is expressed over and over again. Many of Miłosz's poetic cycles, such as "City Without a Name," "Bobo's Metamorphosis," and "From the Rising of the Sun," are full of such cryptic and overt confessions: "I attend to matters I have been charged with in the provinces," he says in "The Unveiling."[24]

The back of the dustjacket of *Conversations with Czesław Miłosz* reproduces a sketch made by the poet of the Manor of Szetejnie, where Miłosz was born and where all the components of this estate were carefully planned and cultivated for generations. The reader will find in many texts information about the structure of that house, its functionality organized according to the newest agricultural guides. Asked in 1980 about the purpose of inserting such mundane topographic details into his poems, Miłosz explained this as his defense against the homelessness that is an affliction of our age.[25] His fear was justified by his own exile and distance, but even more so by the fact that under the devastating Soviet economy, Lithuania was bound to lose its landscape and have its signs of culture and history deliberately obliterated: "Our heritage will be

21 Ibid., 239.

22 This aspect of Miłosz's poetry received extensive examination in two works published in Polish: Beata Tarnowska, *Geografia poetycka w powojennej twórczości Czesława Miłosza* (Olsztyn: Wyższa Szkoła Pedagogiczna, 1996); and Wojciech Ligęza, *Jerozolima i Babilon: Miasta poetów emigracyjnych* (Kraków: Baran i Suszczyński, 1998.)

23 Czesław Miłosz, "The Wormwood Star," tr. Robert Hass and Renata Gorczynski, in his *The Separate Notebooks* (New York: Ecco, 1984), 79.

24 Czesław Miłosz, *Collected Poems*, 252.

25 Anna Frajlich, "Nobody Chooses Loneliness," in *Czesław Miłosz: Conversations*, ed. Cynthia Haven (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 12–23; reprinted in this volume.

handed to unknown people. / Will they respect the hives, nasturtiums by the porch, / Carefully weeded patches, the slanting apple trees?,"[26] asks the poet.

Several years after the publication of that dustjacket sketch, Miłosz had an opportunity to assess the losses: the house, the park, the amenities, the old trees, even the deep river and lake were gone. In his writings one may find certain elements that America shares with Miłosz's Lithuania: its late coming to civilization, its pockets of undisturbed nature, the fact that both countries' high culture was the product of colonization,[27] the resistance of centralization by singular communities in both countries.

> Generation after generation we lived against the State
> Which would not overcome us either with threat or punishment.
> Till a perfect State appeared on the earth.
>
> The State is perfect if it takes away
> From every man his name, sex, dress, and manner,
> And carries them at dawn, insane with fear,
> Where, no one knows, to steppes, deserts,
> So that its power is revealed.[28]

These facts, however, set apart the East European from the American experience; hence the untranslatable alienation. In 1949 Miłosz's "anthropological meditation"[29] prompted him to state, "We have had our home founded in history," which we find at the end of the seminal poem "A Legend."[30] It is a defensive strategy; having lost his home in space, he builds one in time, and eventually finds his native land in his "mother tongue."[31] Possessing a "home in history" deepens the sense of loneliness and alienation of a European in America. Not only the signless vastness of America's landscape, but also the States' lack of history affected him, as it affected many European writers before him.

In many of his poems, notes, and essays, Miłosz emphasizes again and again his predilection for the Belle Époque. Every scrap of memory, every regional and even trivial anecdote preserved from that time is of tremendous value to him. He, the poet associated with the trend once called a second vanguard, does not shy away from this old-fashioned, somewhat pathetic period. Sometimes he questions this strong longing himself. Only when we realize that the Belle Époque, the era when he was born and

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26 Czesław Miłosz, "Far Away," tr. by the author and Robert Hass, in his *Provinces* (New York: Ecco, 1991), 49.

27 In addition, Miłosz liked to use the English-versus-Scottish relation to explain his complex situation as a native of Lithuania who finds his home in the Polish language and its literature.

28 Miłosz, *Provinces*, 52.

29 Fiut, *The Eternal Moment*, 2.

30 Miłosz, *Collected Poems*, 102.

31 Ibid., 216.

his parents were young, gave birth to a twentieth century which twice lost its innocence in worldwide wars, do we fully understand this need to go back to that "tutor womb" of time. Here Miłosz's effort could be compared to that of Albert Camus (much admired by Miłosz), who also possessed a strong need to return to the "womb" in his final, unfinished book, *The First Man.*

The theme of the return must be seen in the context of exile. And the greatest affliction of exile is loneliness; so, understandably, loneliness is a recurrent topic in Miłosz's poetry, perhaps most vividly expressed in "A Magic Mountain," but also represented by the image of drinking to the mirror, which we find in several poems and letters, for example: "I toasted mirrors weepily / And learned my own stupidity,"[32] and "too much drinking to the mirror."[33] Loneliness, more or less a natural condition for an American poet, is very taxing for the European writer, who usually inhabits a literary environment marked by the constant exchange of ideas. With time, Miłosz accepted his loneliness and appreciated its blessing. "Loneliness is a curse, nobody chooses loneliness," he said in his interview for Radio Free Europe, "but without it I would not have done what I have done."

These factors affected the way Miłosz viewed the American landscape, which is his mindscape as well. Volumes have been written about Miłosz's landscape of exile. Critics point to the fact that it is often barren, virtually a wasteland, and either lacks signs altogether or consists of blurred signs:[34] "Grayish clay, dried-up creek beds, / Hills the color of straw, and the rocks assembled / Like Jurassic reptiles,"[35] and "Nothing here, except the winds of the planet raising dust from the eroded rock."[36] Whereas his native landscape flourishes even after "they had been growing during all the years since they had been cut." This is a consummate example of the recovery of Trahernean "celestial store." The trees transcend their devastation; this is why his "dream of return" is "multicolored, joyous," and the poet "was able to fly."

At the center of the myth of return is the place to which one needs to return. As was the case with Odysseus, for Miłosz the house is the center of identity: "Once again I return to excessive orchards and only the echo seeks me in that house on the hill under a hundred-year-old hazel tree."[37] The topic of the house recurs in a later poem: "When Tomas brought the news that the house I was born in no longer exists, / Neither the lane nor the park sloping to the river, nothing, / I had a dream of return."[38]

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32 Miłosz, "City without a Name," in *The Separate Notebooks*, 167.

33 Miłosz, "I Sleep a Lot," in *Collected Poems*, 177.

34 According to Aleksander Fiut, "the dryness, emptiness, and deadness of the California landscape take on additional meaning, becoming signs of an earthly hell, perhaps the Land of Ulro" (*The Eternal Moment*, 57).

35 Miłosz, *The Separate Notebooks*, 25.

36 Ibid., 43.

37 Miłosz, "With Trumpets and Zithers," in *Collected Poems*, 197.

38 Miłosz, "The Wormwood Star," *The Separate Notebooks,* 70.

Almost as if his yearning for apokatastasis[39] was granted fulfillment, Miłosz was able to visit his native provinces on more than one occasion. During his subsequent return in 1997, the poet, to his great joy, came upon the hazel tree that is endowed with the protective qualities of an absent house in the poem he addressed to it.[40] The tree, known so intimately from his childhood, did not participate in the poet's "biography," which, as opposed to life, he calls "an invention." Only tangible things are endowed with real existence, the rest are imponderabilia. The tree still has the potential to offer him support, for he may carve a cane out of one of its branches. In his "postscriptum" to this poem Miłosz states that he returns by "the nonexistent road." Interestingly, the poet indicated *two* places where the poem was composed: Szetejnie in Lithuania and the Napa Valley in California. This definitely attests to the ambivalence of return, and to the fact that Miłosz's *navigating* is still in process. This ambivalence is reinforced by the fact that Miłosz's is not only a double passage, but rather, if one were to use a mathematical metaphor, a squared one. He must conquer time as well as space. Perhaps that explains his reference to a "nonexistent road."

The sensualist and nature lover in Miłosz certainly do not leave him indifferent to the wonders of the world that he encounters on his innumerable sojourns. In spite of the incompatibilities of the two experienced landscapes, he reluctantly accepted his plight and created very vivid, if painful, American nature scenes: "True, when the manzanita is in bloom / and the bay is clear on spring mornings / I think reluctantly of the house between the lakes / and of nets drawn in beneath the Lithuanian sky."[41] However, even if accepted and perceived, this landscape does not nourish, it does not quench his thirst. Hence the constant need to return to his native landscape and cityscape, which always communicate some spiritual, literary, or cultural sign to the gazing poet. As Tanner emphasizes, the European poet, in general, enjoys a reciprocal relationship with nature, something that is alien to the tradition of American poetry and apparently difficult to attain in the face of such vast spaces. The signs, even if they exist, are blurred. There is one more difficulty: if in Europe civilization or history facilitates communication with the landscape, in America the signs of civilization prevent such a union, for it (civilization) brings about a different kind of bareness. In one of his early letters from America, written before his exile, Miłosz describes his situation in the States as that of a mouse trying to nest in an aluminum pot.[42] Thus, one of the most trivial signs of civilization, the aluminum pot, stands in the way of sensual contact with the landscape.

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39 "Yet I belong to those who believe in *apokatastasis* / That word promises reverse movement." From Czeslaw Miłosz, *Bells in Winter*, tr. by the author and Lillian Vallee (New York: Ecco, 1978), 68.

40 Czesław Miłosz, "Do leszczyny" [To the Hazel Tree], *Kwartalnik Artystyczny* 2, no. 18 (1998).

41 Miłosz, "Elegy for N.N.," in *Collected Poems*, 239.

42 Czesław Miłosz, *Zaraz po wojnie: Korespondencja z pisarzami 1945–1950* (Kraków: Znak, 1998), 378.

According to Tanner, the American landscape or landscapes are not easy to form a connection with, even for the American poet. Whitman's poem "A Noiseless Patient Spider" attests to this difficulty. Tanner elaborates on the spider image in American poetry; for him the spider represents both creativity (symbolized by the spinning) and heroic effort, as the creature attempts to attach itself to reality. Miłosz also finds a spider, but in a bathtub. This spider stands no chance of attaching itself to anything.

> The thread with which he landed stuck to the bottom of the bathtub
> And he desperately tries to walk on the glossy white
> But not one of his thrashing legs gets a hold
> On the surface so unlike anything in Nature.
> …
> My house has two bathrooms. I leave the spider
> In an unused tub and go back to my work
> Which consists in building diminutive boats
> More wieldy and speedy that those in our childhood,
> Good for sailing beyond the borderline of time.
> Next day I see my spider:
> Dead, rolled into a black dot in the glittering white.[43]

This image, so very different from and even contradictory to the spiders of the American poetic tradition, speaks for itself and brings to mind the image of the mouse in a pot. Yet if an American landscape is negatively affected by the ax of industrialization, in Lithuania, as the poet will painfully learn, it is the ax of destruction, a destruction that has no aim beyond itself: "I noticed that one part of the boulder was hacked away, / somebody had tried to smash the stone with a hammer, so that / not even that trace might remain."[44] Thus to Nineveh, in his first poem of return, this is Carthage.

Miłosz comes from the landscape of exile to find his landscape exiled from his "native realm." Szetejnie, the shining model of harmony, is hardly recognizable; it exists only in his first Trahernean mystical poem, "The World," and on the dustjacket of *Conversations with Czesław Miłosz.* The nourishing qualities of life vanished beneath the ax of history, but the signs that man left behind are not those of civilization.

Civilization, however, is not what the poet seeks in his returns, he seeks the nonexistent answers to the eternal question: "He to whom the pitiless truth of existence is suddenly unveiled, cannot but ask: How can it be?" In this "Return,"[45] written several decades after his first translation of Traherne's identically titled poem and his own first "Return," he does not forget the spiritual meaning of the return: "And yet I will not repudiate you, unlucky youngster, / nor dismiss the reasons for your sufferings as foolish." Like Traherne, the poet dismisses "the fattened wisdom of adults" in his quest for "a changeless garden on the other side of time."

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43 Miłosz, "Spider," in *Provinces,* 45.

44 Miłosz, "In Szetejnie," *Facing the River,* 65.

45 Miłosz, *Provinces,* 59–60.

In the slim volume titled *Facing the River*, Miłosz includes the cycle "Lithuania after Fifty-Two Years." Of all the friends who were supposed to meet at the bank of the river, in his first poem of return it is he alone who now keeps the appointment. The return cannot be realized because it is a return to a time that has passed; it is an impossibility. In many poems he had already stressed that everyone else is absent. Here, as in his exile years in America, he is alone. Only he can assess the gains and losses. The landscape of return is no less painful than the landscape of exile; perhaps the return is, after all, "unattainable." But even if he does not find long-remembered scenes of nature and signs of man, the poet finds himself, in one poem, in "A Meadow." In a Trahernean sense, this poem marks his ultimate return; this is where the poet finds his prelapsarian world intact: "Grasses and flowers grew there familiar in my childhood. / With half-closed eyelids I absorb luminescence. / And the scent garnered me, all knowing ceased. / Suddenly I felt I was disappearing and weeping with joy."[46]

46 Miłosz, "A Meadow," in *Facing the River*, 21.

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