

# Czesław Miłosz. A Stockholm Conference

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## Konferenser 26



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# From Fascination to Revulsion

## Nature in the Writings of Czesław Miłosz

By *Włodzimierz Bolecki*

I. A subject which often appears in Czesław Miłosz's works is nature.

Almost in every one of Miłosz's verses one can find its components: birds, insects, plants, animals. It is the same in his prose and essays: nature, landscape or geographical space are subjects to which Miłosz devoted a good deal of attention and sometimes many pages of philosophical, aesthetic, and biographical comments.<sup>1</sup>

Let us begin with the last ones.

Miłosz recalls many times that in his childhood he wanted to become a scientist. He was fascinated by encyclopedic descriptions of plants and animals, their illustrations and classification; he collected botanical atlases, kept a herbarium and with great passion read books in which nature plays an important role.<sup>2</sup> Many of these books were about nature in his homeland, i.e., the Vilna region of Lithuania. One can find traces of this boyish fascination in later commentaries on readings in his childhood and adulthood: it suffices to mention Adam Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz*, Józef Weysenhoff's *Sobol i panna*, the novels of Eliza Orzeszkowa, Maria Rodziewiczówna, Józef Mackiewicz<sup>3</sup> or the American poets, e.g., Walt Whitman and Robinson Jeffers.

However, it is striking that nature in the writings and thought of Miłosz is not only an object of description. It often happens that elements of nature have "non-natural functions" in his writings—they are metaphors, comparisons, symbols. In other words, they belong to the literary language of the writer by means of which he speaks out on various subjects that often have no connection at all with nature, e.g., philosophical, historical, or aesthetic subjects.

Another dimension of this subject-matter is its place in the work of Miłosz. Is the nature about which Miłosz writes in *Dolina Issy* (The Issa Valley), for example, the same nature about which we read in *Widzenia nad Zatoką San Francisco* (Visions from San Francisco Bay)?

This is the general outline of my remarks.

I begin with the work least typical of this subject, for in it nature is not a subject of reflection at all. However, the ideological function of the elements of nature in this work are so characteristic that they help us to better understand Miłosz's other works. This work is the novel *Zdobycie władzy* (Seizure

of Power; 1955), whose subject is the failure of the Warsaw Uprising (1944) and the seizure of power in Poland by the Soviet Army.<sup>4</sup>

The elements of nature appear in this novel in two functions.

First and foremost they are interpretations of historical events, i.e., they explain the meaning and mechanism of the domination of Poland—and really all of Central Europe—by means of the terror used by the communists. Social life in the novel is compared to an anthill, people to insects, which understand nothing, are volitionless, blinded by ideology and easily perish in the fire of history (like proverbial moths). On the other hand historical events—that is, the Soviet occupation—are simply the effect of the “forces of nature”, a kind of “lava” which—for reasons only known to nature—has suddenly spilled over Europe and changed the entire picture of the world.

Hence this function of the elements of nature permits the following interpretation: The Soviet Army, which takes power in Poland by force, turns out to be a part of nature, so to say; it is the personification of nature’s laws, mechanisms, its ruthlessness and cruelty. History is governed by the law of the victory of the stronger species over the weaker, and this means that crimes, destruction and brute force become a process of natural selection in social life. So historical events are determined in the same way as rhythms of the seasons, the order of day and night, and the evolution of the species. In short, the evolution of history has been interpreted as so-called historical necessity, and the latter in turn has been identified with the evolution of nature. Hence Charles Darwin has replaced Karl Marx.

Milosz in his essays referred to this subject several times, most often in the form of questions without answers. Among other things he asked: is the cruelty of the tortures inflicted on people by other people evidence that the law of Nature also embraces this species?

In what does a crowd in the street differ from a community of amoeba, except that the elementary impulses of people are more complex? (RE 67.)

One might suspect that one was a potential executioner. And there is somebody in every person to whom with the help of his “I” comes the naturalistic way of thinking. The temptation to carry over the laws of evolution to society soon becomes almost irresistible. Then others merge into a “mass” subordinated to the so-called great lines of development. (RE 70.)

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech Milosz spoke of numerous “temptations of the mind” in the region of Eastern Europe, “where degenerate ideas of domination over people like over Nature led to paroxysms of revolution costing countless millions of human lives killed physically or spiritually”.

Elements of nature that belong to the landscape play an entirely different role in this novel. When the “evolution” of nature serves as an interpretation of historical events, the landscape stands out against them as a counterpoint, as their negation and at the same time as a point of reference. The landscape

in this novel of Miłosz's is most often a hidden metaphor or symbol of the Nature-Garden, hence a place snatched away from the destructive workings of historical time. In this symbolic Garden rules Order opposed to the Chaos of war. History destroying all order, all values, and the material shape of the world seems unreal from the perspective of this Garden. In history there is nothing permanent; there is only destructive force. The only reality, the only proof of real, timeless existence in this situation seems to be Nature. So we read in Miłosz's novel: "The tree trunks outside the window were black in the sunlight, their cylinders had in them an incomparable density of truly existing things. The place where they grew out of the flat ground was truly a place of growth, the coming to life of form."<sup>5</sup>

This statement of the narrator of the work is astonishing. It turns out that not the time of social events, not culture, not history, but nature is the place where order, pattern, values come into being creating a stable point of reference for the destruction and senselessness of war. In comparison with the cruelty of war, in comparison with the destruction that history brings with it, the permanence of Nature is the greatest phenomenon of existence, a priceless value, a myth, the lost paradise of man. Thus from the cataclysm of war Miłosz drew the following conclusion: when the world is falling apart and plunging into the chaos of war, man needs the idea of Divine Order, the idea of the Garden of Paradise, the idea of the world not real, but as it "ought to be"—and hence a symbol of duration and rescue. It can be found only in what is indestructible, unchanging, not subject to the madness of people, that is, in Nature.

The most complete metaphor of this idea of the Nature-Garden in the work of Miłosz is the novel *Dolina Issy*. So I will say a few words about the functions of the motif of nature in this work.

II. In *Dolina Issy* nature is first and foremost the object of detailed descriptions. Kinds of trees, shades of the coats of animals, the shapes of leaves, colors of sunrises and sunsets—all of this Miłosz describes with almost encyclopedic exactness. Every detail in the novel (e.g., the plumage or voice of birds) makes up the richness of Lithuanian nature. However, Miłosz is concerned with more than a faithful description of this richness. After all, *Dolina Issy* is not a catalogue of Lithuanian nature. The writer's aim was not only to describe nature precisely, but also to present the intensesness of a boy's contact with nature, a boy who loses the naïveté of a child and thus enters the adult world.

Critics have many times called Miłosz's work a "masked treatise" and even a "theological treatise", having in mind the symbolic meaning of the novel. I would like to add a few words to these interpretations.

In telling about the childhood of his hero, young Tomasz Surkont, the nar-

rator presents his contact with nature in two ways. On the one hand the detailed descriptions of nature are the means by which the young Tomasz becomes acquainted with the ontological richness of the world. The names of animals, birds, plants, insects, etc. and then their classification make up a special language by means of which the child discovers the world around him and tries to come to grips with it intellectually. The more names, the more varieties, the richer nature seems to him. For a detail, especially one that can be grasped with the senses, is for Miłosz a sign of reality itself. After years Miłosz wrote about the need for a "sensual link with the detail". "I derived much pleasure from the streets of Paris, the valleys and hills of the French provinces, where a slate roof in a clump of greenery, fields, a bridge, meadow almost burst from the density of their unique, individual existence [...]" (WnZSF, 33).

So the more things the hero of the novel is able to name, the fuller and more direct his contact with nature seems to be. This colorful richness of animals, plants, and landscape lures young Tomasz, to whom it seems that knowledge about nature brings him closer to its "core". In short, the acquisition of knowledge about nature appears to him as a crossing of the boundaries between himself (as a man) and nature. This cognitive impulse leads to the identification of Tomasz's "I" with nature, to identification of the child with the world surrounding him. For Tomasz the identification with nature is both emotional and social: Tomasz—the narrator says—"has already gotten used to himself as a citizen of the forest".<sup>6</sup>

So when Tomasz believes that he has come to know nature so deeply that he has become its "citizen", when it seems to him that by becoming engrossed in nature he will find his place in the world, it suddenly turns out that he is wrong. For he himself—as a man—makes impossible a complete identification with nature. In the forest man hunts, he kills. Tomasz also hunts and kills—to his dismay—a small squirrel. And now the hero discovers that between him and nature, whose "citizen" he had wanted to be, a gulf has appeared. This gulf is called "brute force", "cruelty", "crime" and—fear. The unity with nature, toward which Tomasz aspired and which seemed close to him, in the end turns out to be impossible to attain. "Why this barrier and why, if one loves nature, must one become a hunter?"—the hero of the novel asks dramatically (DI, 177). Years later Miłosz commented as follows on his childish fascination with nature:

A small boy loves Nature, which appears to him as colorfulness, enchantment, charm, and loves a woman, a girl from next-door, who knows, perhaps so erotically—vegetatively—birdlikely—insectly that he would give her, if she asked, his herbaria and butterfly collections. But the entry into adolescence is the entry into fear, the fear of Nature, the fear of woman, who appears as the representative and ally of the inexorable order of the world. (WnZSF, 26.)

The Valley of Paradise—he adds elsewhere—awaits the “spear of the hunter”—and so who will “dream of communicating with Nature other than through conquest, competition, the victory of the strong and the defeat of the weaker” (WnZSF)?

Hence the cognition of nature, whose goal was to be identification with it and crossing the boundaries between the child and the world, ended in defeat, that is, with the awareness that the world and man have their separate boundaries. This awareness is expressed most succinctly by another hero of the novel, Baltazar, whose painful cry is directed “against the fact that earth is the earth, the sky is the sky and nothing more. Against the limits that nature itself has set for us. Against the necessity through which I am always I.” (DI, 236.)

In this dimension *Dolina Issy* is a story of the search for man’s place in nature—among animals, birds, plants. Tomasz begins with the search for the garden of paradise, the Valley of Paradise, in which man and nature are one. He ends with the bitter knowledge that this identification is impossible and that life must be lived in suspension between the boundaries of the human world and the world of nature. The culminating point with which the narrator of *Dolina Issy* leaves us is the ascertainment of this state of things: “it became our lot to live on the boundary line of what is animal and what is human and that is well” (DI, 288).

III. A development of Miłosz’s earlier reflections on nature and on the relations between man and nature is his volume of essays *Widzenia nad Zatoką San Francisco* (Visions from San Francisco Bay). In it one can find all of the earlier threads of Miłosz’s “philosophy of nature”, but their meanings have been fundamentally changed.

If in *Dolina Issy* and *Zdobycie władzy* there was—so to speak—the “temptation” for man to identify with Nature or with its laws, in *Widzenia nad Zatoką San Francisco* this temptation has been categorically rejected. In these essays there is no hope for partnership between nature and man, and the evolution of man and the evolution of nature are described as two entirely different things. “I achieved nothing, I took part in no evolution or revolution [...]”—writes Miłosz in comparing his existence with the existence of the California pine-trees (WnZSF, 12).

In *Dolina Issy* one of the “barriers” between man and nature was “hunting”—a metaphor of crime and domination of the stronger over the weaker. The hero of the novel believed, however, that this “barrier” could be overcome through knowledge about nature, through giving names to its elements, through the pedantic discrimination of individual varieties of its tremendous richness. Meanwhile, in *Widzenia nad Zatoką San Francisco* the greatest “barrier” turns out to be this very knowledge about nature, which puts a wall

of words between man and nature. Miłosz writes: "There is no such thing as 'I and Nature' [. . .], between me and what I see, what I touch, there arises a pane: my thought thrust upon me by the so-called state of knowledge and biology lessons" (WnZSF).

The matter here concerns not only language changing the sensually felt concreteness of Nature into an abstract concept, a word—though this thread also exists in Miłosz's writings. More important for Miłosz was the supposition that the individual elements of nature and their features can "be the design of impersonal calculation, an example of a universal law. At that time my childhood also ended." (WnZSF.)<sup>7</sup>

There is yet another reason for feeling the distinctness between man and nature: morality. The human world is an axiological world. We distinguish good from evil, truth from falsehood, sense from nonsense. Meanwhile, nature—Miłosz writes—is "chaos occurring without valuations"—"for itself it is neither beautiful nor ugly, it is perhaps only a screen for people's internal hells and heavens" (WnZSF, 13). "In the face of Nature I am not 'I', I bear the stamp of civilization and like it I have the sense of danger, revulsion to the impersonal cruelty written into the structure of the universe" (WnZSF, 23).

Miłosz compared the youthful fascination with nature to the passionate love of two lovers: Romeo and Juliet—"My Juliet"—he wrote—"was both the ungraspable profusion of shapes and colors and one insect, one bird riveting my attention for days or weeks on end" (WnZSF, 18). But in *Widzenia nad Zatoką San Francisco* Miłosz now writes only about "revulsion." These are the polarities of these violent emotions.

The narrator of these essays discovers that vis-à-vis nature he is completely lonely and isolated:

Facing the pines by Feather River or on the rocky promontories gnawed away by eruptions of oceanic whiteness [. . .] I stand stripped [. . .]. Strangeness, indifference, stony or stonelike eternal duration and I in comparison with it—the flash of a split second (WnZSF, 12). I find in myself an already strongly rooted belief in my loneliness, as a man, in the face of ungraspable space, movable but empty, for no voice comes from it in speech familiar and accessible to me (WnZSF).

Here—it seems to me—is the point of arrival of Miłosz's "philosophy of nature": nature lies beyond the realm of human communication. It is indifferent, empty, lives by its own rhythm, in which man for himself cannot find any signpost, any law, any value. "But I, locked up in the limits of my skin, destructible and conscious of my destructibility, am a speaking being and so I need Thou, to whom I could speak, for I do not know how to speak to clouds and rocks" (WnZSF, 63).

So the "Juliet" of the youthful fascinations in *Dolina Issy* changes in *Widzenia nad Zatoką San Francisco* into a cold monster: morally indifferent, deaf to the voices of the human world, plunged in chaos it seems to take on

those features which Miłosz earlier in the novel *Zdobycie władzy* had attributed to the monster ... history.

There is yet another personification of nature to which Miłosz refers in his reflections on the difference between European and American civilization.

Europe gives him the feeling of being in Nature, being inside, the feeling of rootedness in what is local; it permits the intensive experience of the detail, protects the identity of the subject and the landscape.

In turn Miłosz senses America as an "antediluvian animal", as a mythical Beast, a Moloch at which a person—no matter whether a newcomer or a native—can look only from the outside. America does not permit him to sink roots, it condemns one to look at it with the eyes of a spectator, someone who looks at Nature as a theater. It is sometimes an admirable spectacle but artificial, separated from life and abstract.

So it might have seemed that Miłosz would find authenticity and values in the negation of nature, that is, in American civilization. Nothing of the kind. In civilization—and Miłosz extends his observations to the entire civilization of the 20th century—he perceives all of the negative features of ... nature. However, nature allowed itself to be loved, it tempted and deluded man into believing that he liked it, that it would allow itself to be conquered, mastered. Meanwhile civilization thrusts man into powerlessness and escapes from him—like that evil genie from the bottle in the fables from *The Arabian Nights*.

In Miłosz's writings reflection on nature is reflection on man's place in the world. It is an attempt to answer the oldest philosophical questions: who is man, what is his place in the universe, where does evil come from, why did God allow it to exist? But there is no final answer to any of these questions in Miłosz's work. In his writings man only becomes aware of his tragic dilemma. Whenever he attempts to set up some order beyond himself—in Nature, in History, or in Providence—he feels the conflict between his "I" and this order. And when he attempts to find this order in himself, he discovers his own inadequacy and mysterious links with all of the world around him, whose sense—in spite of his efforts—he cannot fathom. Not being satisfied with stating that nature simply is—wrote Miłosz—"I ask what this means? [...] Is it a meaning which I do not know? Or no meaning?" (WnZSF, 17.)

It is time to sum up. On his attitude toward nature Miłosz most often writes in the biographical perspective. Hence he prompts the critics as to the development of his interests from "stubborn divisions", "from the madness of Aristotelean classifications", through the discovery of Darwin's laws and theory of natural selection, to consent to a vision of fluid and undefinable nature, and finally to the feeling of strangeness vis-à-vis nature.

He also prompts another development of his interests in nature, which arrange themselves concentrically around some question. For example, around



discovering the multiplicity of varieties of one species: in nature—Miłosz notes—something is similar and at the same time dissimilar, something is identical and at the same time not identical. So further questions arise: from where, by virtue of what exists—if it exists—comes the universal principle or essence of a tree, oak, or bird? So is the existence of something possible like “being a jay”, hence “jayness”, or “being a magpie”, hence “magpieness”?<sup>8</sup>

However, perhaps closer to the truth is a third explanation, which can also be found in Miłosz’s reflections on his intellectual autobiography, namely that all of these motifs, subjects, interests and passions are already there together in his youth, and it would be in vain to separate them methodically. The fact that some of them turned out so and not otherwise was due to chance and—as Miłosz writes—events complicated by history. However, the impulse which set all of these inquiries and questions, passions and flights in motion inhered in him alone. “This goes back a very long way”—Miłosz writes—“to that evening when the orchestra played in the park, when couples kissed, but I (then sixteen-year-old) was as though separated from the crowd by a thick pane, terribly alone.”<sup>9</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> There already exist many works on this subject. See i.a.: Aleksander Fiut, *Moment wieczny. Poezja Czesława Miłosza* (Part II: “Romans z Naturą”). Paris 1987; Ewa Czarnecka [Renata Gorczyńska] *Podróżny świata. Rozmowy z Czesławem Miłoszem. Komentarze*. New York 1983; *Poznawanie Miłosza*, a collective work edited by Jerzy Kwiatkowski. Kraków 1982.

<sup>2</sup> “The science room with its modern microscopes attracted me as the seat of knowledge that was not in the least abstract to me for it concerned my forest and hunting practices. There we dissected leeches, we examined the beating heart of a frog slit open and holding our breath so as to delicately turn the micrometric screw, we set the microscope to the right sharpness over a preparation of plant or animal tissues. [...] I did not limit myself to exercises and textbooks, I looked into professional books. Halfway through my school career, i.e., in the fourth grade, I gave my first lecture: on the selection of species and Darwin. [...] I had no doubts about one thing: that my future profession was already determined and that I would become a scientist.” (Cz. Miłosz, “Wychowanie katolickie” in: *Rodzinna Europa*. Paris 1983, p. 63. I refer to this book further as RE.) “A scientist, collector of May-bugs suffocated in fumes of formalin and impaled on a pin, of specimens of plants in herbaria [...]”—Miłosz writes about himself in *Widzenia nad Zatoką, San Francisco*. Paris 1980. I refer to this book further as WnZSF.

<sup>3</sup> Mackiewicz is the first especially important writer here, for he was a scientist by education, was born and brought up in the same parts as Miłosz, and was an expert on descriptions of Lithuanian nature. His approval of the faithfulness of the descriptions of nature in *Dolina Issy* Miłosz himself accepted as a sign of the highest recognition.

<sup>4</sup> I write in more detail about these matters in the article “Proza Miłosza” (*Pamiętnik Literacki* 1984 No. 1) reprint in my book *Pre-teksty i teksty. Z zagadnień związków międzytekstowych w literaturze polskiej XX wieku*, Warszawa 1991.

<sup>5</sup> Czesław Miłosz, *Zdobycie władzy*. Paris 1980.

<sup>6</sup> Czesław Miłosz, *Dolina Issy*. Kraków, 1981, p. 243. I refer to this book further as DI.

<sup>7</sup> Years after Miłosz has put the same thought in the poem *Six Lectures in Verse*:

The true enemy of man is generalization.  
The true enemy of man, so-called History,  
Attracts and terrifies with its plural number.  
Don't believe it. Cunning and treacherous,  
History is not, as Marx told us, anti-nature,  
And if a goddess a goddess of blind fate.

(Lecture IV)

<sup>8</sup> See the poem "Sroczość (1958).

<sup>9</sup> "Niedziela w Brunnen", *Kultura* 1954, no. 3, reprint in: Czesław Miłosz, *Metafizyczna pauza*. Selection, introduction, and elaboration by Joanna Gromek. Kraków 1989, p. 15.

The *World* is written in the style of relaxed prose, as mostly rhythmic stanzas. Its deliberately naive tone can hardly find an equivalent in English. Several translators have tried a hand at it. A fine version by Robert Hous and Robert Pinsky was published in my volume *The Separate Elements*. For this book, however, I opted for a version done by myself, less ambitious but novel.

This was an important decision. It means that in the first analysis what the poem conveys for many (then how it does so). But in this way, too, *The World* would seem to come into existence. The Polish reader will, more or less consciously, place one of them in the context of his own language and culture. But in the meantime, the second one will evoke various reminiscences in the English-language reader. One point demands particular attention: it was noticed, spontaneously and independently, by Polish and American critics. I am thinking of the comparison of Miłosz with William Blake. In his description of Miłosz's poetry, Robert Hous notes:

It is the "Song of Innocence"—An original elaboration of being—retained "Song of Experience" in the meditations on death, time, historical happiness in "Voices of Eight People". *The World* seems to be a poem in the midst of submission to a small, imaginable human dream, but a close reading will suggest how many other things it gives with.

What, then, are those hidden lines or dimensions of *The World*? Which of them are lost in translation?

Let us begin with the title. The original Polish version includes a subtitle: *Forma niwie* ("Narrow Poem"), which has been dropped in translation. This has important consequences. In the first place, the generic definition of the work is thus removed. It can be read as a longer poem or as a cycle of poems—this affects our understanding of the significance of its composition as well as of its place in the history of literature. In the second place, the Polish term "poema" is an archaic and obsolete form; the word in contemporary Polish is "poem". Summarizing up the archaic form bestows an intention to enrich and suggests the traces of antiquity that run across the whole work. To be more precise, the juxtaposition of "poema" and "niwie" refers on the one hand to a venerable tradition of profound and serious contents, and on the other