MIŁOSZ’S BIOLOGY LESSON

Abstract: Over the years *Visions from San Francisco Bay* (1969) has proven to be essential both to Miłosz’s life and to his writings. It was there that he formulated, for the first time with such a force, the theses that would later reappear regularly in his essays and poetry. One vital aspect of the intellectual construction outlined in *Visions* was the concept of Nature. Miłosz proposed a “presentistic” approach, arguing for the concept of Nature as an indispensable element of contemporary thought. His reflections were restricted to motifs closely related to his theses about Nature: Nature and beauty, human/animal relations, and the theory of evolution.

Keywords: Miłosz, anthropology, Nature, human/animal relations, theory of evolution

1.

“Jestem tu” (Miłosz 1989: 5) – “I am here” (Miłosz 1983: 3). The personal pronoun in Polish is only implied, the place yet unspecified. I and the world. Perhaps: I in relation to the world. Or rather, as the reader learns later, I facing the world. This is the initial formulation of *Visions from San Francisco Bay*. From this unsophisticated – one may say, cognitively unpromising – antithesis, Miłosz derives the entire anthropology expounded in his book.

One crucial element of the intellectual construct presented so expressively in *Visions* is the notion of Nature, usually capitalised as if to stress its role in Miłosz’s argumentation. No matter how we interpret *Visions* today, Nature undoubtedly ranks high among the dominant subjects of Miłosz’s investigations. This overrepresentation was immediately noticed by Miłosz’s friend Józef Sadzik, who wrote soon after the book’s publica-

Formally, Visions can hardly be called a treatise, since its structure is digressive, meandering and kaleidoscopic, but behind these diverse deliberations there is one controlling idea. Nature enters the opening chapters fortissimo and then returns with a varying intensity, sometimes directly, sometimes in disguise. If this interpretation is correct, we may begin with reconstructing the main contexts in which the notion is used, with examining its associations, because the dark semantics of Nature seems the key to the philosophical anthropology outlined in the book.

2.

To a stranger from a distant country (“I come from a place without automobiles, bathrooms, or telephones;” Miłosz 1983: 36), Nature appears first in its diverse inanimate forms. With its peculiar geographical situation, California provides an excellent vantage point to observe Nature’s marvels. It is a borderland in a double sense: the farthest West, bordering on the ocean, and an expanse split through the middle by a natural boundary, a fault, “the deepest on the continent” (Miłosz 1983: 194).

The first, and overwhelming, impression may be that of an immense space painfully irreconcilable with the human size. The Californian experience is an experience of Nature in excess, in geological ecstasy, in gargantuan hypertrophy of its innumerable forms: “empty hills banked up to the horizon” (Miłosz 1983: 7); Crater Lake with its inaccessible steep shores devoid of vegetation, a “geological caprice” (Miłosz 1983: 15) defying human pragmatism; towering redwood forests where “[s]mall human figures are diminished not by the redwoods’ trunks, too huge for comparisons, but by a lower level, in relation to ferns larger than a man and to the fallen, moss-covered logs which sprout new green shoots” (Miłosz 1983: 14); or Death Valley, the dried-out bed of a salt lake, where silence is “so mighty it reverberates with the shifting sands in the dunes, the crunch of the petrified salt underfoot” (Miłosz 1983: 15).

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1 The review comes from Józef Sadzik’s private archive; it was not published in the author’s lifetime.
Faced with those primal forms of Nature, Miłosz discovers the lack of even the most elementary bonds, of the smallest affinity between them and himself. The scale is wrong, a common language is missing, and foreboding silence swallows the human voice like a stone dropped into a well. Inanimate Nature appears to the viewer as the domain of radical otherness, stony indifference and insurmountable strangeness. Ultimately, it turns out to be a senseless emanation of chaos, a habitat of mindlessness, an asemantic abyss of forms and elements where order and meaning can be imposed only by the human mind. In this vision, Nature is not a protective and trustworthy Mother but an evil Stepmother, insensitive to human yearnings and expectations.

Human beings who experience the enormous pressure from the outside and the inside (from hostile resistant Nature and from debasing biology culminating in death and bodily decay) live their whole life in that outrageous trap. Nature is not an impartial player, a loyal ally of the human species. Perhaps for that reason Miłosz can justify human conquest of the natural world: “I am prepared to accept (...) the sight of man destroying nature” (1983: 148). These are shocking words when uttered by a former naturalist, but they conform to the entirety of his mental construct. The conquest of Nature – a part, as Miłosz indicates, of human destiny (a reflection of the Biblical command “replenish the earth, and subdue it;” Gen 1: 28) – has the opposite effect as well: the victim takes vengeance on its violator. On the one hand, “subduing” Nature has led to the construction of its civilized double, a second Nature “which to its members appears to be Nature itself, endowed with nearly all the features of that other nature” (Miłosz 1983: 68), equally alien and hostile. On the other hand, Nature’s revenge consists in the hypertrophy of corporality and in the growing expansion of the sexual myth. Paradoxically, the more we strive to rid ourselves of the natural heritage, the deeper it affects us, as if to confirm the

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2 But in the following sentences, as if to temper those harsh words, Miłosz laments over the wasteful logging of the Californian redwoods: “A lover of the forest, I turn my eyes away from the hideous destruction on the mountain slopes where the saws have passed. The ecological balance destroyed, this forest will never grow back. Or was that part of the cost, too?” (1983: 148).

3 “The very body of a person, whether he be educated or not, recoils from a cold, brilliant, perfectly consistent slab of metal, glass, concrete, or synthetic materials which cannot be embraced by sight or touch, and it recoils from the power residing behind that armor, as well” (Miłosz 1983: 67).
“I am here. Those three words contain all that can be said – you begin those words and you return to them. Here means on this earth, on this continent and no other, in this city and no other, and in this epoch I call mine, this century, this year” (Miłosz 1983: 3).

This is the beginning of Visions from San Francisco Bay. Viewed over forty years after the book was written. I am here. Not Miłosz and not in California. But the problems Miłosz once posed to his readers still prove to be riveting. My solutions may be peculiar to me, but I, too, face the fundamental questions concerning the status of nature and the resulting shape of anthropology. Admittedly, there are no cognitively compelling unequivocal answers in sight, and those given with absolute certainty today may turn out to be outdated tomorrow. Nevertheless, the Californian biology lesson continues.

The texts we read are never cognitively neutral but always anchored in biographies, outlooks, philosophies. We decide whether we treat Miłosz’s visions as outmoded misperceptions or as penetrating insights that are still relevant. We may be reading Miłosz’s book, but the book is also reading us.

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trans. Anna Skucińska

Bibliography


