



Czesław Miłosz: Conversations. Cynthia L. Haven, ed. Jackson. University Press of Mississippi. 2006. xxx + 217 pages. \$50 (\$20 paper). ISBN 1-57806-828-2 (829-0 paper)

OURS IS AN AGE in which the intimacy of physical proximity and interpersonal exchange has been replaced by rather uncertain coexistence of anonymity and perpetual fleetingness of experience. We e-mail and text-message, but we don't talk, or not as much as we used to. Daily we are reminded of the alleged superiority of the latest electronic devices brought about to advance our ways of communicating. With the single push of a button, we can express ourselves and understand others, or so we are told. The result is that we continue to live on the go, and so do our thoughts, feelings, and emotions.

A good place to begin sorting them out would be with this collection of interviews with the late Czesław Miłosz, splendidly edited and published under the aegis of the distinguished Literary Conversations Series of the University Press of Mississippi. Miłosz's greatest gift remains his ability to provide answers to ever-compelling questions of human existence. Two years after his death, having barely accepted it as a fact, we turn again and again to the great master, searching for previously overlooked gems born under his pen.

It is no coincidence that this book has appeared in print; more are on the way. What we have here are eighteen interviews conducted between 1980 and 2001 by both journalists and the likes of Adam Michnik, Joseph Brodsky, Robert Faggen, and Anna Frajlich. However, because the interview-

ers had somewhat disparate backgrounds and reasons for seeking an interview with the poet, the book as a whole feels rich in material and depth but also a bit uneven in terms of the quality of the questions posed. Hence, what is most praiseworthy about the book is the goal behind it: mainly, its aim to recreate for an American reader the idea of what kind of reception and attention Miłosz had experienced in the United States after winning the Nobel Prize. Starting with a great introductory essay, the editor has managed to bring to light a man who was not only a poet and a great master of literature, both compassionate and of piercing intellect, but also a man who was no stranger to humor and laughter—a man of contradictions to some, perhaps, but one whose mind seemed to be pumping on all cylinders at all times.

For someone who may be new to Czesław Miłosz, this book demonstrates that his erudition and an aura of grandeur did not overshadow his modesty or his profound sense of responsibility to the universe and language. The biographical timeline and expansive bibliographical notes only add to the sensational feeling of being brought closer to him. Reading his answers to questions about his background, his views on history and politics, religion and poetic language, we wish we could be there ourselves and ask him one more question, or two. What would it be?

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only venture in verse translation. He traveled and lived briefly in other parts of the Arab world—Syria, Iraq, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Morocco—and he met with writers he had translated or would later translate. In the 1960s he started in London an Arabic literary magazine, *Aswat*, which published some of the best Arabic writing of the period. Later he established the Heinemann Arab Authors series, which brought wider attention in English translation to some of the most creative Arab novelists of the time.

Johnson-Davies is not only an excellent and prolific translator to whom we are thankful, but he has been so when modern Arabic fiction has been enjoying a vibrant florescence after tentative beginnings in the first decades of the twentieth century. I wish he wrote more on his impressions of the Arab authors he knew and translated; for he writes less and less about them as his memoir proceeds to its end.

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