

## BOOK REVIEWS

Marek Bartelik. *Early Polish Modern Art: Unity in Multiplicity*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005. ISBN: 0719063523, Pp. 225.

In, perhaps, a quirk of fate, it so happened that the publication of Marek Bartelik's *Early Polish Modern Art* coincided with the publication of Marci Shore's *Caviar and Ashes: A Warsaw Generation's Life and Death in Marxism, 1918-1968* and Timothy Snyder's *Sketches from a Secret War: A Polish Artist's Mission to Liberate Soviet Ukraine*. All three authors researched the same area of Polish culture in its historical formation during the second and third decades of the past century, focusing on its fascinating field of visual arts and literature crossing with emerging body politic of ethnic minorities/nationalities. While the purpose of this review is not to compare these volumes, one cannot help but wonder what does this undoubtedly fortunate coincidence in the otherwise meager publishing market related to things Polish signify. In all probability, it does not stand for a renewed investment in Polish studies on the part of the academic press, but rather is an indication of the growing interest of the American scholarly community in the enormously entangled beginnings of Polish modernity.

The author of the volume in question is mainly known as an art critic who "translates" contemporary Polish art for the sake of an American audience. However, his output transcends this unilateral focus, for Bartelik also reaches other territories of artistic production, some more central, some peripheral. Therefore, before *Early Polish Modern Art* he published several single-artist volumes; among them *To Invent a Garden* on the Latvian artist Adja Yunkers, *The Sculpture of Ursula von Rydingsvart* (co-authored with Dore Ashton) and *Orlan, refiguration, Self-Hybridations* (co-authored with Dominiue Baqué Orlan). The present volume shifts his interests to the past. The author's reason for including in his research the earlier stages of modernity was caused, as he phrased it, by "the ethnic cleansing wars" (1) in the Balkans (which seems to somewhat contradict the fact that the book originated in his dissertation). But in fairness to the author, he consistently displays his empathy toward the predicament of various underdogs of interbellum Polish society, whether it has to do with women's travails or peripheral location of the Jewish, Ukrainian and other minorities. Clearly, this theme constitutes one of the book's recurring motifs. Therefore, the aesthetic paradox of unity within multiplicity, emphasized in the volume's subtitle, is frequently projected against the social, linguistic and political definition of unity within a plurality.

Bartelik's present publication belongs to the category of valuable and informative books, which help to modify standard art history's focus on the West European canon of art. *Early Polish Modern Art's* main objective is to describe at length several artistic groups that emerged in the second decade of the past century in Poland, that is, at the time of epochal systemic change, of the nation's regaining independence. These were the Formist, Expressionist, Young Yiddish and Futurist groups, constituted in Kraków, Poznań, Łódź and Warsaw, respectively. For this reason, a good portion of the book focuses on introducing to the American reader the specificity of Polish political and historical position. This effort results in the author's meticulously placing the works of art in an organic continuity with wider societal forces and contexts, in particular, in his positing the artistic groups in question against the backdrop of urban landscapes. Bartelik takes the reader through the trajectories of these groups' formation intermingled with their members' individual careers; development of their artistic programs (often articulated in manifestos); and, to a lesser extent, their ideologies and critical reception.

None of these trajectories engages the present — relevant to the volume — lively theoretical interest in the constitution of a group or in the politics of friendship. Instead, the author's historicist and ideological strategy is to recreate at full length the dynamics and backdrop of these short-lived movements and groups. As he states in his forward, his intention is not to engage in "broad hypothesis and speculation" (5). Indeed, as this claim suggests, the author does not find much use for philosophical and theoretical thought. While this approach, when faithfully practiced, is the polar opposite of what this reviewer adheres to, it is at the same time an approach she respects. Nonetheless, one should be aware that the perpetual movement of history, in the Hegelian sense, cannot be captured and analyzed as it occurs. A historical analysis is never completely devoid of systemic temptations that are ordering the entropy of events. There exists a broad array of historical approaches in the visual arts and none of them is ever simply historical, as every one of them retreats to and often construes models of periodization, paradigms such as style, imagination, ideology, genre, etc., not to mention all sorts of conceptualization conditioned by an individual critic's lexicon, perspective, and historical experience. Bartelik wrote a book that ascribes to the rules of re-writing and ordering historical temporality more strictly than his previous writings, the fact determined by his book's origin in his dissertation, as well as by his somewhat vague usage of a group identity "as a unifying factor" (4).

Arguably, Bartelik's approach is most original when he deals with the sociopolitical processes. His historical analysis of the ambiguities and ideological clashes between the partitioning powers and the Polish population in partitioned Polish land and its sequel — the complex interrelationship between the newly-organized state institutions and the art

scene of independent Poland — offer a refreshing perspective. Yet he is at his best when he faces and describes a single work of art. It is at those dialogic moments between the author and an artistic product when his critical vocabulary foregrounds the complexity of historical data and enriches our understanding of the early Polish avant-garde contribution to world culture.

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Anna Frajlich, *Between Dawn and the Wind*. Expanded Second Edition. Translated by Regina Grol. Austin, TX: Host Publications, 2006. Pp. 143 ISBN: 0924047410

Called “the best Polish poetess of her generation,” Anna Frajlich has written eloquently of the emigrant experience. Her eleven volumes of poetry have explored various aspects of that experience, from physical dispossession and cultural transplantation to spiritual homesickness and the search for a new cultural identity.

Born in 1942 in Kyrgyzstan in the former USSR, Frajlich was raised and educated in Szczecin. After graduating high school, she moved to Warsaw, where she completed her M.A. in Polish Literature, began a career as a journalist, married, and had a son. It was only in 1969, in the aftermath of the communist government anti-Semitic campaigns, that she left Poland and renounced her Polish citizenship. After settling in New York in 1970, she pursued a number of professions — working in an epidemiology lab, writing for Polish language newspapers, reporting for Radio Free Europe — before enrolling in a doctoral program in Slavic studies at New York University. A few years later, she began teaching Polish in the Department of Slavic Languages at Columbia University, a position she still holds today.

Frajlich also started composing and publishing poetry, written exclusively in her native Polish language. Since her first book appeared in 1976, her collections of poetry have been translated into numerous languages, including French, German, Russian, Hungarian, and Hebrew; and four of the volumes have been published—and widely and well reviewed—in Poland. Over the years, her literary achievements have been recognized with various honors and awards, including prizes from the Koscielski Foundation and the W. & N. Turzanski Foundation; in 2002, she was awarded the Knight’s Cross of the Order of Merit [Krzyż kawalerski Orderu Zasługi Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej] by then-President of Poland Aleksander Kwaśniewski.

In this second expanded edition of *Between Dawn and the Wind*, Frajlich returns to a number of familiar themes. In simple language, using a personal voice, she writes of pain and regret, of displacement and

homelessness, of departure and estrangement, of enslavement and deliverance. She likens her own exile from Poland to a biblical exodus: “Driven out of many a land / for Jacob’s and Abraham’s sin / my forefathers / my parents and I / to this day we are wandering” (7). Now, “Nothing’s left of the gods’ feast / not even crumbs of millet / for the birds” (75). Even after “we’ve found a place” in a new land, “we’re only / a transplant / grafted on a branch” (143).

For Frajlich, as for other émigrés, the past remains very much alive in memory, which is usually based on “acute pain [that] penetrates the essence,” like a toothache that continues even after the tooth is removed (71). “The past,” Frajlich writes, “lays its claim through sign names / lays its claim through a healed scar on a stone / those bidden farewell long ago return more and more often” (17). Even though “the ocean divides us” and cuts time like “a knife,” superfluous memory “still puts the palms of your hands on my cheeks” (113). Yet, “like after a long illness / after that love / we come back / we come back” (109). Although Frajlich fears that she will forget “my native landscape / my daily landscape” (11), she confesses that “I still remember / the silence of continents / frost on the wire fence / and the way to school” (9). Places leave a particularly deep impression on Frajlich: museums celebrate the passing of civilizations that parallel her own losses; cities are lost, found, or reclaimed in memory; even streets evoke instant associations to childhood.

Like memories, dreams offer a bittersweet reminder of all that has passed. “The dream,” Frajlich writes, “still remembers you under the heavy eyelid” (99). Her mother dreams of Lvov [Lwów] (a lost “Arcadia”) and of a house on Sykstuska Street that no one else remembers anymore: a carpenter lived there, “a poor widower / with his six children.” Frajlich herself “wakes up every morning / as if to an eternal dream” (63). In yet another poem, she dreams of her father, “who had lost his way / at some turn of the road / return[ing] to me” (135). Yet she wistfully concludes that “these dreams will help / neither him / nor me /and nothing will be different / than what happened / could have happened / had to happen” (135)

Poetry, however, affords Frajlich a way to reconcile the losses, reclaim the memories, and give expression to the dreams. “Between the candle and chill / between dawn and the wind / between waking and sleep,” she writes, “I’m dreaming a strange poem,” a poem which “sometimes / lies undisturbed for years / as sunken ships lie / at the bottom of distant seas” (89). Later, she explains that “I don’t know which way to go / but I do have to discover the created / and to form the unformed from hard clay / and give shape to it” (57), because only the artfully arranged “songs of the poets” can elicit the past.

Some of Frajlich’s most poignant poems feature her parents. She likens her mother to a mother bird displaced from her nest “in Lvov in Warsaw and by the ocean” and forced to become “a migrating bird” (15).

Yet, “like other mothers,” she eventually must leave again, “taking with her / nothing for the road.” As her mother wades “in the dark waters / of Lethe,” Frajlich observes, “she stretches her hands toward me — / yet I cannot help” (137). Although Frajlich is left with only memories that her mother “reclaimed / saved / and gave to me,” each time she calls up those memories, “it’s as if / we were having coffee again / the same cup from your kitchen” (139).

Using evocative and recurring images often drawn from nature (birds, seeds, apples, stones), Frajlich writes in a simple yet highly accessible style. At the same time, however, she deftly incorporates literary, historical, and cultural analogues (Hatshepsut, Diocletian, Socrates, Plutarch, Mickiewicz, Dante, Yeats, Mozart, Renoir, Braque, Chagall, Bruno Schulz, Georgia O’Keeffe, Marilyn Monroe) that give her verse a great resonance and a sense of universality and that allow her to create an altogether remarkable poetic landscape.

Beautifully and sensitively translated by Regina Grol, the poems are presented in a bilingual format, with the original Polish verse and the English translation on facing pages. Professor Grol also provides a brief narrative biography of Frajlich and an introduction to her work as well as a very useful chronology of personal and professional events in Frajlich’s life. Apart from a few unfortunate typographical errors, the volume is a fine model of bilingual publication; and it invites the reader to become part of the poetic dialogue. As Frajlich suggests in one of her poems, “We search for winding roads / leading us to each other” (119); and this volume clearly provides one such avenue.

As Polish poet and critic Adrianna Szymanska noted, Frajlich captures “in words the passage of time, touching with verses the places of former domicile, as well as the ambiguity of existing in the ‘here and now,’ and express[es] all that in simple language based on proverbs and idioms.” *Between Dawn and the Wind* confirms Frajlich’s poetic talents and establishes her as an important voice in contemporary exilic poetry.

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Richard Ned Lebow, Wulf Kansteiner, and Claudio Fogu, editors: *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe* (Durham, North Carolina and London: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 366, footnotes, bibliography, index. ISBN 0-8223-3817-3.

This collaborative set of essays originated out of discussions held at Ohio State University in 1999 and two conferences of specialists sponsored by the Seidel Foundation in 2001 and 2002. The book deals with the subject of “historical memory” and the intersection between scholarship and

knowledge. The focus, as generally agreed upon by the conference organizers and the participating scholars, was to examine the subject of historical memory and history in a selected number of European countries and on a set of interrelated subjects, the Second World War, Nazi Germany, and the Holocaust. The aim was to relate “historical memory” (or what one might call the prevailing, if sometimes changing, popular thought on the subjects taken up) to what scholars have written in free societies and in some cases what governing régimes, especially those running totalitarian states, put forward as the official “truth” on the question. Such an approach to history and historiography is fascinating, has a dynamic character, is provocative, and slippery too.

At the conferences, the participants worked to develop some common approaches to looking at historical memory. They also identified appropriate scholars who were interested in looking at the War and the Holocaust from this perspective and writing about the issues raised in terms of a single country.

Seven countries were chosen for study: Germany, France, Austria, Italy, Switzerland, Poland, and the Soviet Union. The editors explain their selection of these countries by having each country fit into a general typology of states involved in some way in the war and where the fate of their Jewish populations was important. There is no essay on the United Kingdom, though British leaders made critical decisions in military strategy throughout the War at the same time they knew of Germany’s ongoing destruction of the Jewish population.

Germany, Austria and Italy are identified as the “losers” in the War, with the focus in each of the studies involving attempts by citizens and scholars of those countries to grapple with the evil of Nazism and collaboration with Nazi policy. Obviously, the greatest problems have faced German scholars in their postwar efforts to deal with the Nazi period. How to understand Nazism? As a disturbing deviation from the pre- World War I history of Germany? Or is it more proper to recognize that Nazism, though extreme in countless ways, has roots in German history, which need to be confronted and discussed?

Of course, Germany receives a special place in this typology, as the perpetrator of the War. The USSR is included as a victor state whose totalitarian régime constantly sought to identify “lessons” from the “Great Fatherland War” in the postwar era. This it did to further enhance its enormous monopoly on the communication of information and thought in generating popular obedience to the régime as the great defender of the country from the bloodthirsty enemy. By the 1980s, however, this type of legitimization had lost much of its value as the generations that had suffered through the War began leaving the scene.

Switzerland is selected as one of the neutral states in World War II, a state that included people who were prepared to collaborate with Nazi

Germany. France (and to some degree Italy and Austria too) are identified as “in between states” — whose fate involved their experiences as losers in the War, as occupied countries, as collaborators, and as resisters too. France was selected as a “victor” state as well.

Poland is identified as simply an “occupied state” and linked with France, Yugoslavia, and Norway as a country with a record of resistance to Nazi rule. Clearly, this characterization is both inadequate and troubling.

Poland was in fact the first country to be attacked, without warning, by Germany and the first to resist, despite the extraordinary military disadvantages it faced. It was conquered and suffered in horrific fashion under a ferocious Nazi, and Soviet, occupation. But Poland not only produced the largest and most effective anti-Nazi internal resistance movement in Europe; regular Polish military forces aligned with the United States, Britain and, ironically, the USSR also fought on all fronts against the Nazi régime, and made numerous notable contributions to the Allied victory. Polish military units were important in the Battle of Britain, at Monte Cassino, Normandy, and Berlin, and many other places. Polish mathematicians broke the seemingly impenetrable Nazi “enigma” code, a critical contribution to the Allies’ victory. Polish civilian losses will never be known for certain, but may have numbered 7-8 million persons (over three million of whom were Polish citizens of Jewish heritage) out of a prewar population of 35 million. This figure includes the victims of Soviet totalitarian violence and wartime resettlement into Siberia and Central Asia.

At war’s end, Poland, though an important ally against the Axis powers, fared far differently from France, which had the good fortune to be liberated by the United States. Instead of liberation, Poland fell, against its people’s will, but with the acceptance of the United States and Britain, under a new tyranny imposed by the Soviet Union.

Why Poland is so inadequately categorized in this book is itself a very pertinent question to put to “historical memory” specialists. While both the introductory and concluding general essays in the book, essays written by the editors, do contain some useful information about Poland’s experience, their overall thrust does not correct their categorization of Poland as an occupied state in the World War.

Oddly enough too, in a book devoted to the study of the Holocaust, there is no essay in this work about Jewish historical memory and the scholarly history on this subject.

This review will focus on the article dealing with Poland, with some mention of the essays on the Soviet Union and Germany.

Professor Annamaria Orla-Bukowska, a social anthropologist in the Institute of Sociology at the Jagiellonian University, was selected to write the article on Poland. It is entitled “New Threads on an Old Loom: National Memory and Social Identity in Postwar and Post Communist Poland.” This title provides a good idea of how she approaches her complex subject.

Poland's long history is presented as a vast, millennium-old, tapestry that includes a host of fabrics, designs, and threads, many of them damaged by the experiences of the country. The continued thinking about the meaning of Poland's history is compared to the task of the weaver who must repair the tapestry. The tapestry has many features —there is the legacy of greatness in the era of the royal Commonwealth, the tragedy involving the loss of independence in the more than 120 year long partitions period, the brief experience with independence between World Wars I and II, the devastation of the Nazi and Soviet occupation between 1939 and 1945, the long era of Soviet-imposed Polish Communist rule until 1989, followed by the rebirth of an independent democracy. Her analogy also affords her the freedom to look at Poland as a multinational entity in some periods of history and as a largely ethnically homogeneous country in other times. Here the gentle Poles' relationship with the historically substantial Jewish population of Poland, second in the world only to the United States in 1939, comes into play. This is particularly the case with respect to the fate of the Jewish population in World War II, postwar Communist régime distortions of the tragedy that befell the Jews, and Polish intellectual and popular responses and repudiations of these efforts in the Communist era. It also has her discussing the controversy that followed the appearance in 2000 of Jan Gross' book, *Neighbors*, as to the behavior of Poles towards Jews in the town of Jedwabne and several nearby villages in 1941.

Orla-Bukowska is to be commended for her effort to attempt an analysis of Polish history that takes in so many themes. Her "threads and loom" analogy is thus an appropriate one. But there are flaws in her approach that must be noted here.

Evidently, Orla-Bukowska, as the one Polish scholar involved in this project, did not play a role in defining the categorization of the countries covered in this book. Given this circumstance, it is especially hard to understand how certain significant pieces of information essential to understanding Poland for a cross-national book on historical memory and World War II do not get into her essay. Perhaps she assumed that "everyone knows" of the numbers of Polish dead due to the War, Polish gentiles and Polish Jews and Polish citizens of other national origins, even though no such data appear elsewhere in the book. Even a paragraph like the one this reviewer wrote above would have sufficed, if only to set the record straight.

(Sadly, the authors of the essays on Germany and the Soviet Union do not even mention Poland in their work. Poland's fate under the Nazis receives no mention. Nor do Stalin's crimes committed against Poland during the War, e.g., the Katyn Forest Massacre, which Orla-Bukowska herself brings up as "blank spots" in Polish-Soviet relations.)

But there are other flaws in this otherwise, well-written, even literary treatment of Polish history and historical memory. Here are a few:

Throughout her essay, the perspective of Poland as victim, as “Christ of the Nations,” as a martyr nation, is noted, with some disdain, several times as a kind of mythical appreciation of Polish history and as an obstacle to an honest appreciation of the historic relationship between gentile Poles and Polish Jews. This is in accord with the approach taken by the editors in their introductory and concluding essays. But in view of the actual history of Poland after 1795, one must wonder, not, why many Poles developed this Poland-as-martyr outlook, but why so many outside of Poland have not appreciated the fundamental truth of Poland’s painful experience over the past 200 and more years.

Nowhere in Orla-Bukowska’s comments about modern Polish efforts to grapple with the meaning of the relationship between Christian and Jewish Poles in history and in the Second World War period (or in the book itself for that matter) is there a single mention of the role of Pope John Paul II in his teachings about the Holocaust, anti-Semitism, and Christian responsibilities toward the fellow human beings of the Jewish tradition. For a Polish scholar to fail to even mention the thinking and preaching of the most influential Pole in history on the very issues raised in this book is astonishing.

Finally, in her comments on the debates that followed the appearance in 2000 of Professor Jan Gross’ book, *Neighbors*, the author offers no discussion of the arguments raised about the book by a number of leading Polish scholars as to the book’s methodology, factual evidence, and conclusions. She might, at least, have identified Gross’ Polish critics by name and summarized their views in a paragraph or two. After all, she concludes her essay by making the valid observation that in post 1989 democratic and free Poland, individuals interested in studying the entirety of Poland’s past, and more specifically the history of the Polish gentile-Polish Jewish relationship and Poland’s place in Europe, have opportunities to do so as never before. And sensible people can and will come to sensible conclusions about such matters, if given the time and freedom to sort out the meaning of their history and its relevance to the future.

Historical memory scholarship may have a place in academia. But this reviewer is unconvinced by this particular effort. Until historical memory research makes greater demands that its practitioners demonstrate a comprehensive, knowledge and appreciation of their subject, I will continue to prefer to take my history “straight”.

*Czesław Miłosz: Conversations*, Cynthia L. Haven, Editor. University Press of Mississippi: Jackson, 2006 (217 pages). ISBN 1-57806-829-0.

Commissioned by the *California Monthly* magazine to interview Czesław Miłosz, the 1980 Nobel Prize winner in literature, Cynthia Haven, the editor of this volume, succeeded in doing so in 2000 — in her words — “after some wrangling.” As a former student of the poet Joseph Brodsky, also a Nobel laureate and Miłosz’s friend, she gained entry into Miłosz’s home at Berkeley shortly before the poet’s return to Kraków where he died in 2004 at the age of 93.

Her personal interest in Miłosz had been triggered by Brodsky’s declaration that Miłosz was “one of the greatest poets of our time, perhaps the greatest [...] even when one strips his poems of the stylistic magnificence of his native Polish.” The encounter in Berkeley made a great impact on Haven, currently a literary critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle* and a regular contributor to the *Washington Post Book World*, for it led her to embark on a project of combining her own interviews of Miłosz with the post-Nobel prize interviews of the poet by other journalists and critics. The result is the volume *Czesław Miłosz: Conversations*. Published in the Literary Conversations Series of the University Press of Mississippi, the volume contains Haven’s introduction and a total of eighteen interviews from eclectic sources on both sides of the Atlantic. They include journals such as *The Artful Dodge*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Literary Criterion*, *Salmagundi*, *Paris Review*, *Partisan Review*, *The Georgia Review*, *Mysore* (India), the British journal *The Guardian*, the Polish daily *Gazeta Wyborcza*, as well as Radio Free Europe, and Amazon.com (an interview conducted via e-mail).

To those unfamiliar with Czesław Miłosz’s life and work, Haven’s book will provide a sound initiation. Equipped with Cynthia Haven’s well-presented introduction, a chronology of the author’s life and works, a substantial select bibliography of his publications (80 items) and an index, the volume will expose the reader to Miłosz’s major preoccupations — literary, philosophical and social — in a fashion more accessible perhaps than his poetry or prose. It will certainly confirm Miłosz’s stature as a major literary figure, a voice of moral authority and an impressive witness to the crucial events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Yet, there is also a downside to putting together many interviews in one volume. Inevitably, some information becomes repetitive. Mid-way in reading this book one gets tired of confronting — over and over again — the same biographical information, references to the same titles of Miłosz’s works, to authors who inspired the Nobel laureate, and even Miłosz’s own repetitive pronouncements. Perhaps that’s the price the reader has to pay for information directly from *the source*. Miłosz’s answers, explanations and qualifications may minimize the potential of misinterpreting the author’s

public statements and provide the reader with better keys to the interpretation of his often hermetic literary works, particularly his poetry.

Still, while respecting the editor's decision not to tamper with any of the interviews, one wonders whether in some cases the editor's intrusion would not have been warranted, especially in the few somewhat longer essays which, strictly speaking, were not interviews, though they were based, partially at least, on their authors' conversations with Miłosz.

Indeed, as a result of the repetitiveness, one may feel an upsurge of sympathy for Miłosz, the private person who had spent decades as an émigré poet, unknown in the West and banned in Poland, and was then thrust by the Nobel Prize into limelight. Suddenly, he became a celebrity accosted by myriad interviewers and had to answer — *ad nauseam* — questions about his life and work. The historical coincidence of the practically simultaneous emergence of the Solidarity movement, the election of the first Polish-born pope, John Paul II, and the awarding of the Nobel Prize to Miłosz, made “matters Polish” the focus of public attention and only intensified the requests for interviews. Miłosz was in demand not only as a commentator on his own work, but also on current events and the East European experience.

Although, most likely, this was not its editor's intent, the volume can also serve as a primer on interviewing. The style of each interviewer included in this volume is different. So are the interviewers' approaches, perceptions, and levels of insight into Miłosz's work. Thus, while the reader gets a more complex and richly textured image of Miłosz, a novice interviewer could learn a great deal of the “dos and don'ts” of interviewing as well. The editor's mentor, Joseph Brodsky, for instance, comes across as a very poor interviewer, incapable of formulating a coherent question, posing rather trivial questions, interposing too many of his own views and interpretations and, ultimately, exhausting the interviewee. Other interviewers, e.g., Anna Frajlich, impress the reader with their degree of preparation, their thorough familiarity with the author's writings. In the case of a few interviewers one can observe their intimidation by Miłosz; others impose their will and their views on the poet, lecture him, sometimes almost bully him, despite Miłosz's rather assertive personality. Still others approach him as a guru, asking about the future of the world and of humanity, unwilling to recognize his human limitations and unwillingness to play the prophet. One question posed to Miłosz, for instance, was: “So for the situation of fear gripping our civilization today, what would be the way out?” (p.31). Fortunately, some, particularly Robert Faggen of the *Paris Review*, or the Polish historian and journalist Adam Michnik, ask questions which truly elucidate the Nobel laureate's vicissitudes, philosophical views and literary criteria.

The composite image of Czesław Miłosz that emerges from the pages of this book is one of a very conflicted individual, torn about many issues — religious, ideological, literary — indeed, a writer who truly defies

easy categorizations. As Miłosz himself acknowledged repeatedly, his poetry is polyphonic, reflecting the complexity of his views. That is why, unable to explain his often contradictory views and the multiplicity of voices in his works, Miłosz ascribed his writing to a *daimonion* (a little demon) and considered himself a medium visited by it (p.159-60).

Miłosz viewed poetry as “a distillation of a collective experience” and an art form which is inherently hopeful. Yet he recognized that poets are perceived very differently in Poland than in the United States. He noted the high regard for poetry in Poland, where traditionally great importance has been attached to words, where the tendency toward subjectivity has been mitigated by the country’s history and where poets have been endowed with a leading role as spiritual leaders. In the United States, according to Miłosz, poets “are looked upon as renegades, certainly not in the forefront...” (p.57). “In American poetry,” he remarked, “there is a lot of subjectivity and the internal world of the poet.” In Poland there is “a sort of tendency to objectivize more”(p.9).

Miłosz’s occasional sarcasm about American poetry is expressed in the context of his self-lacerating humor. In an interview with Rachel Bergash published in *The Partisan Review*, he stated: “In a way I shouldn’t be considered a man of talent in America because there is a certain idea of a writer, a poet in this country, which I do not fit: I have never been in a mental institution; I do not use drugs; I am not an alcoholic (I drink but moderately); so I am probably abnormal”(p.82). Essentially, Miłosz believed that poets should distil their writing, be participant/observes and engage in what he called an “anthropological meditation” (p.22).

While the poet’s great admiration for Dostoevsky, Lev Shestov, Simone Weil, and his own cousin Oscar Milosz is confirmed in many interviews, one will also find some surprises in this book. One of them is Miłosz’s veneration of Walt Whitman as a fellow “omnivorous” poet. Miłosz’s identification with the mentality of the Yiddish writer Isaac Bashevis Singer, repeated in several interviews, is also surprising, particularly in light of Miłosz’s emphatically emphasized commitment to Catholicism and Singer’s profound mooring in Judaism. One more surprise is Miłosz’s disdain for the novel as a genre tainted by personal elements. Despite his authorship of two novels, he was weary of the genre and found novelists to be “shameless people, telling about their most intimate things under small disguise.” He viewed that to be “indecent”(p.8). In another interview he declared novels to be “an anathema” to him (p.77).

Less surprising is his frequently expressed view of the United States as a country of loners. Talking to Mona Simpson in 1980, Miłosz stated: “Probably everyone in America is lonely. Loneliness is not my own problem. I guess this is a problem of millions of Americans [...]. And especially if you observe young people — they are very lonely” (p.9). He ascribed it to “smooth but superficial relationships between people,” to “the whole style of

American life — suburbia, lack of centers of the city, centers that function day and night,” and to a “a lack of a certain cement [...] belonging to the same community, denomination, school class — this creates ties, national ties, which are so strong in Poland” (p.10).

One must agree with Cynthia Haven that “Miłosz’s worldview, his sense of hierarchy and values, makes him a sobering entrée to a select spiritual salon” and that “although widely praised, he is too little read, too little understood — even in Poland, perhaps, where a younger generation has tried to distance itself from the seriousness of purpose in an older generation of giants” (p.XVIII).

This book definitely enables both American and Polish readers a better understanding of Czesław Miłosz as a poet, a thinker, a social commentator, and a complex man who coined a unique Lithuanian-Polish-American identity.

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REGINA GROL

Czesław Miłosz. *Legends of Modernity. Essays and Letters from Occupied Poland 1942-1943*. Introduction by Jarosław Anders. Translated from the Polish by Madeline G. Levine. (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux: 2005). 266 p. ISBN13: 9780374184995 and ISBN10: 0374184992.

*Legends of Modernity* was written during the darkest hours of the Nazi occupation of Poland, the Warsaw Ghetto and 1944 Insurrections, the organization of the Home Army, the Soviet westward offensive. The thirty-one year old Czesław Miłosz did not record any of it, nor any detail of his everyday life. Yet a revolution was brewing within, causing him to call his youthful actions the “trying on of all the old costumes with which we tried to cover our pitiful nakedness” (151). This rite of passage into adulthood included a thorough reassessment of Western thought. *Legends of Modernity* is thus a deconstruction of Europe’s auto-legends through “systematic doubting that might be capable of unearthing the few values worthy of rescue and development” (151).

Miłosz painted the cultural legacy of Europe in dark colors — Socialism was “wormy,” democracy defunct, Catholicism “a desiccated mummy, its exterior varnished and lacquered,” philosophy “drowning in conventionalism and fictionalism,” and Marxism but “the bastard son [of socialism], marked with the . . . stain of disease and degeneracy.” While “high-placed charlatans” sold out to the crowd, the world of pure ideas and the “aristocrats of the spirit” were derided, isolated, and eventually slain (151-152). The good, humanistic Europe “turned out. . . laughable, powerless, impotent” (155), and was now reaping its punishment by

experiencing the same kind of treatment it once dealt to its African colonies. Nothing highlights Miłosz's sense of abandonment better than the poignant memory of a simple pleasure inaccessible in war-torn Warsaw: "The harmony of the world was just such a truth as one's joy on a June morning when a bright stripe falls on the table through the parted drapes and the aroma of fresh baking and the voices of a market day float in from the street." (65)

How does one choose between hope and despair? Writing the preface in January 1944, Miłosz presented the book as a unified whole with different prisms, such as the existence of natural goodness outside civilization (Daniel Defoe); the automatic/natural evolution of civilization (Honoré de Balzac); the cult of power (Stendhal and André Gide); the predominance of legends and fiction (William James); disillusionment with civilization (Leo Tolstoy); religious pessimism (University of Lwów philosopher Marian Zdziechowski); and metaphorical theories about art (Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz). Despite this well-structured approach, Miłosz's need for dialogue is evident in the fact that his letter-essays with fellow writer Jerzy Andrzejewski occupy half the book. While valuing Miłosz's battle between heart and reason, his "particular fragmentary manifestation of human individuality . . . the dizzying, disorganized pace of [his] thoughts" (160), Andrzejewski argued from the concrete morality standpoint, in support of solidarity, in support of a relational world, and with extraordinary tact pointed out the missing link in Miłosz's thought which conceived of two sides to the world, "the one condemnatory, steeped in dark eschatological vapors, and the other its polar opposite, like a perfect form of wisdom and harmony carved from a block of marble" (162). To counteract the chaos of the age and to sublimate suffering into art, the poet must be insensitive to one's time, but not cold-hearted, and he must commune with his fellow humans.

Miłosz readily admitted to writing a Romantic outcry of despair and revolt which he compared to Alfred de Musset's *Confessions d'un enfant du siècle* [Confessions of a child of the century]. To come to terms with the massive civilizational failure surrounding him, Miłosz staged an inventory of the *maitres à penser* of his youth, presenting them in a structured drama: some as enemies, some as examples, some as glorification. His personal cultural inventory included his Roman Catholic roots, Nietzschean irrationalism, 19<sup>th</sup> century French and Russian novelists, and a twist of Anglo-Saxon wisdom and adventure novels. French interwar writer André Gide emerges as the main defendant in this trial of modernity, the crucible of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's destructive impulses. His unbridled disclosures, his revolt against society, his affirmation of individualism, and his "rapture of self-liberation" (58) paved the way for mass indoctrination disguised as honesty. While crediting Gide with being a "seismograph" of his age, Miłosz condemned his "depravity" which he saw as "having draped a cloak of

beauty around the most poisonous and destructive intellectual currents.” (58) In other words, Gide and the mass media finished the work that Nietzsche began and paved the way for Hitler and Stalin.

Like *War and Peace*'s Pierre Bezukhov, Miłosz must have descended into a threefold abyss: loss of the ability to evaluate events; loss of faith in civilization; stupor and numbness, a “vegetative state.” Like Pierre, he was about to experience the fourth step of rebirth. In the process, he weighed his options carefully: would he choose the rebuilding of a humaneness reduced to the “purgatory of primitivism,” a beginning “from scratch” similar to Robinson Crusoe's (75), the timeless “Know Thyself,” that naked table where only the stoic sit, art as sublimation, or a return within the bosom of the Church? In any case, it would be an anti-modern reaction to the embers of 1914, the Russian Revolution, the Polish-Russian war of 1920, and the 1939 invasion of Poland. Miłosz the survivor chose to go against the current and pledged to live by and for the mind. Having written the obituary of his youthful dreams, he now turned his thoughts to the new generation. His lofty intellectual approach must be seen as a conscious decision to become a role model for the young. In his heroic attempt to overcome fragmentation, he chose a new kind of rationality predicated on freedoms that would be tested again soon, as he testified in *The Captive Mind*.