



Native Realm: A Search for Self-Definition

Czes?aw Mi?osz, Catherine S. Leach (Translator)

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The autobiography of the Nobel laureate

Before he emigrated to the United States, Czesław Miłosz lived through many of the social upheavals that defined the first half of the twentieth century. Here, in this compelling account of his early life, the author sketches his moral and intellectual history from childhood to the early fifties, providing the reader with a glimpse into a way of life that was radically different from anything an American or even a Western European could know.

Using the events of his life as a starting point, *Native Realm* sets out to explore the consciousness of a writer and a man, examining the possibility of finding glimmers of meaning in the midst of chaos while remaining true to oneself.

In this beautifully written and elegantly translated work, Miłosz is at his very best.

Native Realm: A Search for Self-Definition Details

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Trilby says

I got this book when it was first published, but did not finish it. Last spring I picked it up once again, this time in anticipation of an upcoming first visit to the native realm of my maternal grandparents, Lithuania. I found it good preparation for my visit.

Milosz's memoir is a moving, poetical window into the lost world he and my ancestors once inhabited. He well captures the cultural turmoil and political violence that ravaged that region in the first part of the 20th century--in a very personal way. For example, the story of what happened to his college friends during and after World War II is a microcosm of what happened to many intellectuals during that period--the victims, the collaborators, the fugitives.

However, even though I felt the book prepared me for my visit, I was nevertheless shocked at the destruction of the cities, countryside, and the culture and languages of the people who once lived there. War and occupation have ravaged the Baltics; Milosz brilliantly shows the origins and reasons for this violence.

una_sussa says

"Può darsi che in questa mia descrizione del viaggio qualcuno possa trovare un distacco eccessivo, come se lo sforzo fisico d'una intera notte passata nell'acqua delle torbiere non mi avesse riguardato personalmente, oppure come se non avessi sentito il bruciore delle guance schiaffeggiate dall'ufficiale della Gestapo. Non credo però che questa distanza sia opera del tempo [...]. Le forti emozioni o il gemito strappato dallo sforzo non mutavano la mia indifferenza, che era piuttosto la sensibilità di una lastra fotografica, pronta a registrare ogni cosa visibile, salvo se stessa. Strisciando carponi sugli aghi di pino, ingrandivo col pensiero, impossibile, la forma di un ramoscello [...], mentre lo sparo delle guardie risuonava sullo sfondo ad esempio d'un verso di Paul Valéry:

Ce toit tranquille où marchent les colombes.

Il mondo era imperturbabile, magnifico [...]. Un'insospettata forma di esistenza si lasciava quasi afferrare: un'esistenza alla quale era stata tolta ogni cosa superflua, compreso il domani, ma che non è per questo affatto peggiore."

John says

I never wanted this book to end. It is a memoir told as social history, written by one of the greatest poets of our time. You get the feeling that Milosz has witnessed everything, that he has absorbed it all, and what he has chosen to tell us has had to pass through the dry flame of his intellect. Considering the time and place that this book comes from (Eastern Europe, World War II) it could be full of melodrama and sentimentality--but it is lacking in either. You get the feeling that Milosz had to sacrifice a ton for every sentence that he put into this book; the result is mind blowing.

Caro the L. of the H. says

I'm very glad that I got back to this book and reread it after so many years. It's still very up to date and prophetic in many ways.

psychonout says

Visa kas tikrai svarbu, jiems buvo per sunku. Jais nusikra?iau labai lengvai: tegul numir?liai laidoja savo numir?lius.

Biurokrato profesija gal ir labai reikalinga, ta?iau netrukus susiklost? šiokios tokios v?liau pasitvirtinusios išvados. Tai profesija parazito, kuriam užmoka ne už tai, k? jis veikia, bet už tai, kad nuo ryto iki vakaro s?di viename ar kitame kambaryje, už vieno ar kito stalo. Kas m?nes? gauna atlyginim?, kuris niekaip neatitinka jo veiklos rezultat?, o tik viet? hierarchijoje. Nor?damas t? viet? išlaikyti, privalo elgtis pagal taisykles, kadangi jo aktyvumas daugiau turi atlkti organizmo - jo egzistencijos dalies - tvark?, o ne aplinkos pasaulio reikmes.

Frank Ashe says

I was impressed by this book when I read it years ago. Why? I can't remember. I'll add it to my huge list of books to reread.

Eric says

In one of the more inane projects of library school, I had to prepare an index for an index-less book. For some reason I didn't do Nabokov's *Strong Opinions*, an index to which I actually need. I was reading this at the time and figured why not. After starting the assignment I found myself in the very deep waters of central European historical geography, drowning in Polish and Lithuanian place names. The assignment didn't blight my budding affection for the book. Milosz, like Brodsky, has become a companionate presence.

Ilona says

Galinga knyga. Neapsimesiu, kad visk? supratau, ta?iau ir tai, k? tariuosi supratusi ar gal labiau pajutusi, sudrebino mano maž? saug? pasaul?l?. Dauguma ?žvalg? n?ra negird?tos, XX pabaigoje jos tvyrojo ore, zujo kaip mus?s mums bandant ?ipatoginti ir susisukti šiltus stabilius lizdelius nestabiliame ir nedraugiškame pasaulyje. Sunku pasakyti, kas - dvasin? ekilibristika, svaigalai ar nat?ralus l?steli? sen?jmas - pagaliau leido atriboti kasdienyb? nuo t? skausming? ir nepadoriai nuog? ties?. Panašu, kad Milošas su jomis gyveno vis? laik?.

Nežinau, kas geriau: rekomenduoti ši? knyg? vaikams, ar tik?tis, kad nepaklius jiems ? akis. (blogiausia b?t?,

jei po pirm? puslapi? sviest? kampan su ?vertinimu "Š****").

Kam tikrai reik?t? perskaityti, tai Vakar? ir Ryt? Europos politikams. Bet ar egzistuoja knyga, pakeitusi Istorij?? O pakeitusi ? gera?

Ruta Buciunaite says

Puiki knyga! Nenuostabu kad XXa. j? rekomendavo perskaityti vakarie?iams diplomatams, vykstantiem ? Ryt? Europos šalis (o gal ?ia PRas haha). ?domu, kad ?eslovas ?pina XX-to amžiaus Europos istorin? kontekst? ? savo labai asmeninišk? patir?i? pasakojimus (pvz. kaip leidosi Reino upe ir nuskandino kuprin? su dviej? draug? pasais ir pinigais). Puikiai subalansuota.

Akis labiausiai džiaug?si užkliuvusi už tam tikr? moment?:

APIE FORMOS NEBUVIM? kaip neatskiriam? ryt? europie?io identiteto dal? esu pam?s?iusi ir anks?iau, tod?l pradžiugino, kad ?eslovas pam?st? dar anks?iau už mane. ?tartina, bet dažniausiai žmon?s mano tai, k? mano visi kiti žmon?s. Mes esame ?kalinti 2D paklod?je, nes kaip kitaip paaiškinti fakt?, kad draug?s bijo paskal? labiau nei plau?i? v?žio? "Sklinda kalbos" reiškia tai, kad jei kažkas atsis?da tam tikroje paklod?s vietoje - sminga visi. ?eslovas sako, kad skiriamasis Ryt? europie?io požymis yra išorin?s ir vidin?s formos tr?kumas. "Jo pranašumai: godus protas, diskusij? aistra, polinkis ? ironij?, jaum? šviežumas, erdin? ar geografin? vaizduot? kyla iš esmin?s ydos: jis amžinas paauglys, j? valdo staigus vidinio chaoso antpl?dis ir atosl?gis. Forma pasiekiamama stabiliose visuomen?se. Mano pavyzdžio pakanka, kad b?t? patvirtinta, kiek daug pastang? reikia, norint perimti sau priešingas tradicijas, normas ir itin gausius ?sp?džius ar bent juos išd?styti šiokia tokia tvarka. Vaikyst?je mus sukantys daiktai suprantami patys savaime, ta?iau jei jie sukasi ratu kaip kaleidoskopo stikliukai, nuolat keisdami savo viet?, tikriausiai nemažai energijos reikia vien tam, kad kojomis tvirtai jaustum žem? ir nepargri?tum." Arba gali tiesiog ?prasti, spjauti ? integrity ir pakeisti viet?, kai nepatogu. Ar ne?

APIE BURŽUA: "D?l ?vairi? aplinkybi? mes, vyresni? klasi? moksleiviai, užuot vaik?ioj? ? mokyklos bažny?i?, kai kuriais m?nesiais eidavome ? šv. Jurgio kopoly?i?. Tai buvo bažny?ia, kuri? lank? vadinamoji gera draugija. Iš?jus iš jos, pasivaik?iojim? vietoje prasid?davo defiliada. Karininkai atiduodavo pagarb?, advokatai ir daktarai atsakydavo ? sveikinimus, moterys demonstruodavo savo šypsenas, kailius ir skryb?les. Jud?damas toje minioje arba stov?damas skverelyje vos nesprogdavau iš neapykantos. Žmogus, mano manymu, š? t? reišk? tik savo aistromis gamtai, medžioklei ar literat?rai, kad tik joms atiduot? vis? save. O ?ia buvo beždžion?s. Kokia j? prasm?? Kod?l jos gyvena? [...] juos laikiau daiktais." Paklod?.

APIE MERGAITES ?eslovas sužinojo pildydamas slapt? knyg? universitete, ir atrad?s, kad kai kuri? slapt? ?raš? autor?s - moterys. "D?l savo paties nedr?sumo ir aukl?jimo sistemos nebuval draugav?s su savo amžiaus mergait?mis, tad padariau nepaprast? atradim?: pasirodo, jos irgi jau?ia ir galvoja, o su tuo man buvo sunku apsiprasti." Truput? komiška, bet ir džiugu, kad XX amžius tapo didži?j? atradim? amžius feminizmo atžvilgiu, ir ši? dien? intelektualai nebenustemba, kad moteris masto. Komiška, bet ir quite telling.

APIE RUSUS tai turb?t buvo iliustratyviausia pastraipa, koki? kadanors skai?iau: "Be viduramži?, be gilesni? atsiminim?, be katalikyb?s, be riteri? amžiaus praeityje, be pagarbos priesaikoms, amžini v?lyvosios Bizantijos graikai, mandagumo formules išmok? kaip kinai, chamai ar bent jau storžieviai kaip kalmukai, nešvar?s kaip lapiai, graž?s kaip angelai, neišsilavin? kaip laukiniai (išskiriu moteris ir vien? kit? diplomat?), vikr?s kaip žydai, apsukr?s intrigose kaip išlaisvintieji, malon?s ir taur?s savo manieromis kaip Oriento

atstovai, žiaur? s savo jausmais kaip barbarai, iš nevilties sarkastiški ir kupini paniekos, dvilypiai pašaip?nai (iš prigimties ir iš nevisavertiškumo jausmo), lengvab?džiai, bet tik iš paži?ros, rusai pašaukti didiems dalykams. Visi jie apdovanoti nepaprastais sugeb?jimais jausti takt?, ta?iau n? vienas iš j? n?ra toks kilniadvasis, kad gal?t? pakilti virš ?mantrumo. Jie mane pripild? atgrasos tam b?do bruožui, kuris b?tinas norintiems su jais bendrauti." BOOYAH. Vienintel? rus?, kuri? nors truput? pažinojau, buvo mano rus? kalbos mokytoja, o rus? kalbai nuo pat vaikyst?s jau?iu nepaaiškinam? atgrasum?, panašiai kaip trumpiemis nagams ant vyrišk? piršt?. Nepaisant to, b?tent taip visad ?sivaizdavau rusus. Nor??iau susidraugauti su kokiui nors rusu/ruse. Patvirtinti/paneigt; pam?gti?

APIE LENKUS stipriaus susim?s?iau tik beskaitant ši? knyg?. Kod?l lietuviai kaip tauta j? taip nem?gsta? Ar negali tai b?ti tiesiog inferiority complex? Ar m?s? kaip "lietuvi?" tautos identitetas tikrai toks nestabilus? Kaip ta citata, kuri? draugas užrod? iš T.S. Eliot'o Wasteland, kur ponia sako: "Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch" = "aš ne rus?, aš iš Lietuvos, tikra vokiet?." Ar tai, kad mes save identifikuojame su kažkokia "stabilia, istorine, kadaise didži?ja" Lietuva n?ra tik kažkoks brainwashas, kuriam dar nesukako nei šimto met?, kurio išmokome mokykloje tik per atsitiktinum?, ir kuris užsiraucks dar net ne?sivažiav?s, nes nesp?sim jo implementuot prieš tautai savanoriškai emigrujant? O gal aš klausiu ši? klausim? b?tent tod?l, kad esu lietuv? ir neturi formos? Ha, ha, ha.

Žodžiu, ?domaus žmogaus ?domi? min?i? rezultatas - ?domi knyga. Manau, kad ji aktuali ir savotiškai 'gyva' dar ir šiomis dienomis. Tur?t? b?ti privaloma mokyklose. Ir mokiniai gal?t? cituot j? analitiniuose rašin?liuose tema "kod?l Lietuva neturi gero literat?ros paveldo lietuvi? kalba."

Adam says

A brilliant man who lived an incredible life. His poetic writing makes you believe every word and makes you feel like you're with him every step of the way.

"In a certain sense I can consider myself a typical Eastern European. It seems to be true that this differentia specifica can be boiled down to a lack of from-both inner and outer. His good qualities-intellectual avidity, fervor in discussion, a sense of irony, freshness of feeling, spatial (or geographical) fantasy- derive from a basic weakness: he always remains an adolescent, governed by a sudden ebb or flow of inner chaos. Form is achieved in stable societies. My own case is enough to verify how much of an effort it takes to absorb contradictory traditions, norms, and an overabundance of impressions, and to put them into some kind of order. The things that surround us in childhood need no justification, they are self-evident. If, however, they whirl around like particles in a kaleidoscope, ceaselessly changing position, it takes no small amount of energy simply to plant one's feet on solid ground without falling."

"Every one of us is hinged to the society we grew up in, even though we succumb to the illusion that we are free."

Laura says

Each time I read Milosz I am reminded anew and catch my breath again at the power of his writing. I think many writers compose and publish because they are compelled to proclaim their answers, what they

understand about the world. I am so drawn to Milosz because he writes about what he does not understand and precisely **because** he does not understand... "If I am not wise, then why must I pretend to be? If I am lost, why must I pretend to have ready counsel for my contemporaries?...And when the air is filled with the clamor of analysis and conclusion, would it be entirely useless to admit you do not understand?" This memoir is subtitled: A Search for Self-Definition. A search. A process. An exploration propelled onward by faith in objective value, faith in objective meaning apart from absolutes. His writing is penetrating.

While reading this memoir I concurrently read much of the poetry he wrote at coinciding times of his life, which gave both the poetry and the memoir larger dimensions.

Reading him this time, I gained an expanded understanding of duality without hypocrisy. An understanding that duality can exist without hypocrisy--in an individual, and in a society--and of what can be derived from the distillation and refining that is gained by means of an inner tension. Inner tension can serve a purpose within the individual and does not exist simply to be overcome or overlooked.

I also read Milosz, and writers like him, because I believe in the importance of remembering. Those of us insulated from the tragic have been (and allow ourselves to be) trained to forget. Writers such as Milosz bear witness to historical experience and human situations ("there are no boundaries to the knowledge of what is human...and we are always pupils in an introductory class"). But such a witness is left meaningless without the Reader, without the Listener, the Audience. I have always felt an intense sense of purpose and meaning in my role as the Reader. The loss of a sense of history and a sense of the tragic is a disablement and an enfeeblement to humanity. I do not want to be trained to forget. In sharing with me a sense of the tragic, Milosz also leads me towards an answer to the question of hope.

Mirjam Laurisaar says

As an Eastern-European myself, this book touched me deeply. Czeslaw Milosz describes the destruction of this part of Europe, it's cities, it's people, it's intelligence and moreover - it's dignity. He does not describe so much the events themselves as he does the characters. He thus opens up the Polish-Lithuanian conflict, the Jewish concern, the everlasting confrontation with the big brother from the East, and the pre and war time attitude of Germans towards Poles through the stories and faith of the people who have been part of authors life.

He describes the way of thinking of 'old Europe' towards those behind the Iron curtain, as if those from the East were somehow less worthy, less intelligent, less of a citizens of Europe. This mentality, having two parallel Europes - the poor and the rich, the one which tends to be perceived with high-culture while as the other is somehow cultureless, is still very much relevant in modern times. Paraphrasing- Have we too not have beautiful baroque architecture, aren't our bookshelves filled with authors both local and foreign, don't we too have universities founded centuries ago?

Czeslaw Milosz made me analyse my own behaviour. Too often when I travel and have had people asking me about my origins, I reply - oh I'm from this country, and then quickly add before anyone has a chance to specify - It's in Northern Europe. After reading this I truly realize that I am Eastern-European. Yes, we are also in the North, but we are not Nordic nor Scandinavian. We are Eastern-European, our past has defined who we are, we see the world differently from those in the South or West and that's perfectly okay. In fact, it's bloody great.

Brian Gatz says

A terse history of Northeastern Europe--told as if philosophy and poetry mattered, were not just additions to real life, but life itself. I see nothing wrong with that. I should add that the contempt for the soft sciences (or any liberal art) necessarily elevates the hard--so we're stuck in the maths as a principle. Nature may obey the sovereignty of logic--culture clearly does not. Milosz's nuance and breadth of learning demand a great deal of attention from the reader. It's easy to glance at life, especially if locked into a seemingly changeless society. Milosz visits, then lives in America, and, after two world wars, sees a land and people free of history. The tragic is noticeably absent. I don't disagree. We're all of us pushed into our towers, leaning against them, and they do not move (though one day they will fall). It seems this American order will not budge. It seems, too, that the rest of world is in flux. Our two-century-old constitution helps, as does the devastation of the past century--not just in Western Europe, but through Russia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and China (the millions of communist dead)--perhaps New Zealand feels as these United States. ---To combat the plastic soul, I recommend humor and irony. Too, I recommend a reconsideration of accounting: some time left uncounted, some old things around you, a distaste for nylon, and some tender moments of humility as the ancient earth goes on without.

Travelin says

This man is absolutely an old-world intellectual of the highest order. He claims to be mysterious at times, but never enough to defend himself when it comes to that, and his experiences and insights have all the clarity of being fully lived.

As a man he was likely more passive than active in person, a bit proud, a little ridiculous and utterly, even self-destructively dedicated to his art.

It makes little difference, but I wonder in passing if he remained somehow a communist after a decade of work in the embassies of Communist Poland. His memoirs suggest as much but strange that they don't say as much. Does anyone know?

John says

For me this was a five star reading experience. Although he might have preferred a less interesting life, he experienced first-hand some of the momentous events of the 20th century. Perhaps it was the influence of the dialectic, but for much of his life he seemed to be looking for a middle ground (a synthesis?) that perhaps didn't exist. Politically, he aligned himself with Marxism but philosophically he had reservations.

Although eventually defected from Communist Poland, he didn't wax nostalgic for 1930s Poland--too class bound and nationalistic for his taste. He enjoyed the personal freedom, he found in the west, but disliked the acquisitiveness of capitalism and its disregard for the humanities. He hated Soviet Communism and wasn't too fond of the progressives he met in the west.

He spent most of his last 50 years or so living in the west, much of it in the US. Unfortunately (for me at

least), his memoir ends shortly after he leaves Poland, so we don't know (at least from reading Native Realm) whether his views of socialism and capitalism changed during this time.
