



# **Miłosz the Visionary: His American experience in *Visions from San Francisco Bay***

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## ABSTRACT

Nobel Prize winner Czesław Miłosz is one of the most influential poets, prosiest, philosophers, and diplomats, his works spanning two centuries and multiple continents. Born in 1911, in what is now modern-day Lithuania, Miłosz spent most of his professional life in Europe including Poland and France. In 1960, fleeing the power of the communist regime, he found political asylum in California, teaching in the Slavic languages department at the University of California Berkley. The following paper examines Czesław Miłosz’s perspective on the radical West culture of the 1960s and ‘70s in his book *Visions from San Francisco Bay*. This work brings attention to previously unnoticed English mistranslations. I propose a new translation to reflect Miłosz’s original meaning, which changes the way English readers interpret his American experience as well as his book *Visions from San Francisco Bay*. Specifically, I consider two sets of Miłosz’s pros and cons which he crafted to describe the essence of his American experience, and one set of pros and cons I crafted from his writing to frame his experience. These juxtaposing pros and cons ultimately led him to the conclusion of the importance of richly interpreting one’s reality, especially in a time of change and uncertainty. By way of comparative literary analysis of Miłosz’s *Visions* and selected poems, we change the way we traditionally think of the ‘60s and ‘70s, realizing that instead of being a time of explosive interpretive energy, this was a time when Americans fell away from rich interpretation of their metaphysical realities.

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“... I choose to be an incorporeal onlooker, outside the system, in front of a screen on which the planet revolves. In doing, I lose the possibility of dividing things into “above” and “below.” Drawing a vertical line above me, I will not reach the boundary where the world ends and heaven’s spheres begin to circle the throne of God. Neither will any plumb line allow me to bore deeply enough through the geological strata to come upon the caverns of hell. A seething infinity surrounds me on every side and eludes the powers of my mind.” — Czesław Miłosz, “Religion and Space” (*Visions from San Francisco Bay* 30)

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Czesław Miłosz, the Polish poet, prosiest, philosopher, and Nobel Prize winner, was born before the time of automobiles and wrote his last lines in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. His works cover a wide variety of times and places and examine the evolution of ideas and cultures. His American experience placed him in the heart of the western radical atmosphere. Teaching at UC Berkley during the '60s and '70s shaped his American experience as well as his analysis of the evolving American culture. Analyzing selected essays from his book *Visions from San Francisco Bay*, a memoir with autobiographical reflections, in tandem with selected poems written in the '60s and '70s, gives insight into his unique perspective on western US culture.

In his book *Visions from San Francisco Bay*, Miłosz makes the statement that his American experience could be boiled down to three sets of pros and cons: “for the so called average man, against the arrogance of intellectuals; for the Biblical tradition, against the search for individual or collective nirvana; for science and technology, against the dreams of primeval innocence” (218). Throughout his book and poetry written during the '60s and '70s, Miłosz makes, what may seem at first glance, countless binary comparisons and blunt judgments of American social conditions. His sets of pros and cons are one such example. However, upon deeper reflection and analysis, Miłosz’s binary comparisons instead become carefully crafted juxtapositions, written in order to provide a mental contrast between concepts and states of being and designed to engage and encourage the reader to richly interpret their own American experience. Olga Scherer, in her essay “To Ulro Through San Francisco Bay,” tactfully notices that Miłosz avoids binary and polarizing terms, such as communism/capitalism, left-wing/right-wing, myth/reality, and progressive/regressive, to allow space for the reader’s own conclusions (684). In analyzing *Visions from San Francisco Bay*, and selected poems, I will discover that his thoughts and juxtapositions both encourage greater richness of interpretation and give insight into his own deeply reflective American experience that allowed him and others to form their metaphysical world views.

The very title *Visions from San Francisco Bay* presents Miłosz’s first juxtaposition. The words “visions” and “visionary” evoke the romantic concept associated with the ethos of the counterculture that Miłosz observed from Grizzly Peak, his American home and mountain, where his visions were inspired. A visionary is defined as one who “thinks about or plans the future with imagination or wisdom” (Oxford English Dictionary). In crafting juxtaposing pros and cons, Miłosz plays the role of a participatory advocate for encouraging the interpretation and goodness of mankind, as the only traditional dichotomy he proudly retains is “the battle of good versus evil,” a concept central to understanding his visions. Yet, in the above quote from the chapter “Religion and Space,” he makes it clear that his role is that of an onlooker situated outside of the system. It was Miłosz’s deeply held belief that poets and writers must distance themselves from the reality they capture. In his critique of *Visions*, entitled “Rodzinna America” (“Kindred America”), literary critic Dariusz Pawelec expresses similar sentiments, claiming that Miłosz takes a unique stand in writing his visions by never explicitly stating himself as the subject of his writing. This allows him to maintain distance and humility, thereby shifting the focus to the subject of America in an objective manner. Therefore, in reflecting on Miłosz’s writing style, it is important to recognize that his role in observing American life, and in composing these juxtapositions, is involved yet withdrawn—a complex engagement with culture.

Most importantly, in the above quote from “Religion and Space,” Miłosz disclaims that in composing these juxtapositions, his role as a visionary who is both involved in and removed from the system is not to divide things to “above” and “below.” That is, he does not tell us what is good and evil. By pairing dissimilar concepts like “Biblical tradition” and “collective nirvana,” Miłosz creates tensions to invite the reader to draw their *own* conclusions about what is good and what is evil in the aims of understanding their own metaphysical reality. The “seething infinity” that surrounds him on every side is space for the reader to make their own conclusions based on Miłosz’s poetic prose.

## FOR RICHNESS, AGAINST POVERTY OF INTERPRETATION

Excerpt from “On Censorship”

It would be naïve to forget the great poverty of current information and the various edits made by a censorship which works behind the scenes, but often in the open as well. That, however, is not a poverty of “facts:” the more shocking they are the more marketable. And so the imagination must accommodate pain, debasement, violence, poverty, the absurdity of beliefs and morals the whole world over, nothing is placated, nothing tamed by thought, which, after all, does cure us of our anxiety a little if, asking “Why,” we receive an answer beginning “Because.” The world beats on us like unreason incarnate, like the creation of some mad gigantic brain. Can one accept that entire burden and agree that what is simply is, and that’s that? One can, but only by ruminating in a state of brutish contemplation like a cow. If we are capable of compassion and at the same time are powerless, then we live in a state of desperate exasperation. Here surely is one of the causes of that ferocity which I have elsewhere called neo-Manichean. (*Visions* 113)

I noticed, by reading the original text in Polish, that the above underlined sections were mistranslated by English interpreters and should read the following way:

“It would be naïve to forget the great poverty of current information and the various edits made by a censorship which works behind the scenes, but often in the open as well. ***That, however, is a poverty of interpretation, not a poverty of facts; the more shocking they are the more marketable.*** And so the imagination must accommodate pain, debasement, violence, poverty, the absurdity of beliefs and morals the whole world over, nothing is placated, ***but*** tamed by thought, which, after all, does cure us of our anxiety a little if, asking “Why,” we receive an answer beginning “Because.” The world beats on us like unreason incarnate, like the creation of some mad gigantic brain. Can one accept that entire burden and agree that what is simply is, and that’s that? One can, but only by ruminating in a state of brutish contemplation like a cow. If we are capable of compassion and at the same time are powerless, then we live in a state of desperate exasperation. Here surely is one of the causes of that ferocity which I have elsewhere called neo-Manichean.” (*Visions* 113)

In introduction to Czesław Miłosz's American experience, it is insightful to consider his views on censorship to better understand the rest of his insights and juxtapositions. In the above passage, Miłosz shockingly points out that "a censorship" is occurring in the "Land of the Free." To understand this passage, it is of benefit to consider his personal experience with censorship. In his early years, Miłosz lived and wrote in communist Poland, a country that would often censor important facts, such as the details surrounding the Second World War atrocities like in the Katyń forest- where Soviets executed masses of Polish officers and intelligentsia- or any form of speech challenging the supremacy of the communist party and its ideology. Miłosz was deeply involved in Nazi resistance during the regime's occupation of Poland. He worked in the Polish diplomatic service, even serving in the Polish embassy in New York City, after which he became first secretary for cultural affairs in Paris where he sought political asylum in 1951. In 1960, with all of these experiences behind him, he immigrated to the United States ("Czesław Miłosz"). With this perspective in mind, in his essay "On Censorship," Miłosz points out that censorship of facts occurred throughout many cultures. For example, the European colonists censored the truth of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade route, and the Russians censored facts pertaining to the Siberian penal colonies. Thus, a censorship of *facts*, he concludes, occurred throughout history up until most recent times in America and abroad.

The quoted excerpt is a conclusion of Miłosz's reflection on freedom of speech as observed in America, his new homeland. He states in the beginning of the above passage, that censorship of facts is no longer a problem in modern society. Not only in Miłosz's time, but also today, all of the most gruesome facts are presented in the media. Some examples Miłosz encountered in the 1960s included the Buddhist self-immolation in protest to the Vietnam War and the murder of a Vietcong prisoner of war by the chief of the Saigon police. He even points out how American media seeks out these gruesome facts in order to make revenue; shock factor equates to money. This, he asserts, is harmful, because the public becomes desensitized to ugliness, cruelty, suffering and evil. With the freedom to present the horrific facts of this world, we are compelled to accommodate their brutal and unfortunate reality in a very unproductive way. After all, at least we are receiving truthful facts and records. Miłosz postulates that the problem lies in the fact that in America, there is a "poverty" of *interpretations*, not facts, an crucial detail missing from the English translation. One can restate Miłosz's original line referring to a "poverty of interpretation" as a censorship of interpretation because, in order to develop a state of poverty of interpretation, the interpretations must die at some point in the human thinking process. Originally absent from the English translation of *Visions*, this new translation including the poverty of interpretations changes the frame of his American experience and subsequent lessons for readers.

Although not explicitly stated as a "pro and con," the contrast of poverty of interpretation versus poverty of facts is arguably Miłosz's most important juxtaposition. Once one receives the unfortunate facts of this world, Miłosz argues, even if one wanted to use compassion as a motivating force for change, one is unable to interpret them as the imagination constrains the mind. This suggests that censorship of interpretations is more dangerous than the mere censorship of facts. The juxtaposition between facts and interpretations is essential to understand his main argument that Americans are failing to interpret their own reality. Without richness of

interpretation, we cannot change reality or find ways to alleviate its atrocities: we can only “ruminate in a state of brutish contemplation like a cow.” This description of our helplessness demonstrates that censoring our own interpretations reduces us to the state of an animal. We are prevented from voicing our opinions and exercising our values, the very essence of what makes us human. As a result of this censorship, one cannot interpret the painful facts of the turbulent ‘60s, including wars, protests, and social movements, to help steer the public opinion. We are helpless, and, as Miłosz states, “live in a state of desperate exasperation.” In this sense, the self-imposed censorship of interpretations becomes the most dangerous form of censorship yet.

Although not directly addressed by Miłosz, it is important to hypothesize about the mechanism by which this censorship occurs. It seems that registering brutal facts directly leads to a paucity of interpretation. In other words, the registration of shocking facts and unfortunate realities shuts down imagination in the human mind, suggesting that this is ultimately a form of self-inflicted censorship. This is apparent in one of Miłosz’s anecdotes originally expressed in a letter sent during his time at Berkeley to the Polish writer and political activist Jerzy Giedroyc. Miłosz wrote of a time he entered campus with a gas mask in hopes of protecting himself from the dense California smog. To his great horror and surprise, no one laughed, looked, or said a single word in reaction to his appearance, as if passing by an everyday occurrence. In his letter, Miłosz compares this lack of interpretation to the state of brutish contemplation of a cow as it chews cud (Franaszek 876). This is another illusion to the state of helplessness described in his chapter “On Censorship” as a “state of brutish contemplation like a cow.” Again, this story suggests that registering strange facts and uncomfortable realities may be causally related to a paucity of interpretation. This seems strangely out of line with the explosive interpretive culture of the ‘60s. One may argue that the student radicals, black revolutionaries, and social activists all used interpretation of the American political reality as a vehicle for social change. However, Miłosz believed that many of these student activist groups were but symptoms of young people’s inability to interpret their own reality leading to great levels of social and spiritual distress. Instead, they were merely following political “fashions.”

The fact that interpretations are self-censored and that we are thus powerless over our destiny shows that Americans have both freedom of facts and speech, without freedom of interpretation. Miłosz came to America fleeing the persecution of communist censorship, looking for a new world in which he had the freedom to express not only hard facts, but also interpretations. Facts and ideas without internalization by interpretation contribute to a decline in social morality. Miłosz alerts the reader to the silent self-inflicted danger of the poverty of interpretations, as without interpretation, there is no meaning, insight, or honest enthusiasm towards the common good. His open-ended reflections in *Visions* are predicated on this concept. Polish author Olga Scherer, in her essay “To Ulro through San Francisco Bay,” states that “Miłosz recognizes their [cultural products of 20<sup>th</sup> century America] non-instinctive, purely artificial character but makes such “visions” serve as a springboard for pondering the function of instinct immanent in individual striving, especially in everything that touches upon religious faith” (682). Not only is richness of interpretation Miłosz’s argument throughout *Visions*, but also the importance of interpretation and creative inquiry is built into the very style of his writing. His juxtapositions are not limiting

human interpretation but rather serve as a leaping-off point to new reflections, personal moral judgements, and open-minded thoughts—his goal to bring people closer to their own inner truth and metaphysical reality.

## “FOR BIBLICAL TRADITION, AGAINST THE SEARCH FOR INDIVIDUAL OR COLLECTIVE NIRVANA”

Miłosz describes the movements of the 1960s in the following way: “The many thousands of meetings, sit-ins, anti-war marches, attract both those restoring bohemia on a mass scale and those who are activists and organizers by temperament” (*Visions* 127). In his review of the political situation in Berkeley and the rest of America, Miłosz emphasizes two concepts: the resurgence of the bohemia as a fashion and the participation in political activism as a result of temperament or emotion. I will explore the “fashionable bohemia” or counterculture, as an example of creating collective nirvana and as a juxtaposition to Biblical tradition as expressed in Miłosz’s pro and con “for Biblical Tradition, against the search for individual or collective nirvana (*Visions* 218).” In his essay “The Formless and the New,” Miłosz describes this ever-popular counterculture fashion as the rise of a new bohemia that originally developed in Europe: “Could I be witnessing a rebirth of *fin de siècle* bohemia? Everything, the dress, the disgust for the average man, the philosophical reveries, would indicate that I am” (*Visions* 125). He concludes that this rebirth of the European bohemia is a reflexive reaction to the ever-growing machine which is America’s development and onset of automation; it is a symptom of Americans lacking the capabilities to metabolize their quickly industrializing and developing environment.

Once Miłosz establishes the historical significance of the counterculture, he seeks to explore the concept of bohemian counterculture as a fashion. He states in the beginning lines of “The Formless and the New,” “If I did not live here, where fashions, both intellectual and otherwise originate and then spread across the whole of America, I would be probably asking myself somewhat different questions” (*Visions* 122). This sentence makes an initial bold claim that he considers many of the political movements, including the counterculture, to be nothing other than political and intellectual fashions. Miłosz continues:

Different varieties of subcultures appear and disappear as shown by the so-called Existentialists who congregated in Parisian caves right after the Second World War. In most striking forms, the movement I am discussing is just such a transitory subculture, or rather it is one that melts into the general flow of fashion. It is important only in that it is one of the symptoms of America's split into two mutually hostile parts. (*Visions* 124)

Miłosz characterizes the counterculture movement as a fashion, a mere transitory symptom of America’s political climate. With this, the question must be posed: does the fact that this political movement is a “fashion” support or refute the idea that the ‘60s fostered explosively interpretive energies? According to Miłosz’s perspective, it would refute this commonly held belief. By characterizing the movements of the ‘60s as fashions, he implies that by joining these fashions, young people are thoughtlessly jumping onto the social bandwagon instead of interpreting and coming to terms with their reality. He notes that even the quality of this new bohemia has

dramatically changed since its original birth in Europe in that it is less genuine and more fashionable. It is, rather, a historical joke. A rebellion against the growing machine, which is industrialized America, instead of an honest interest in the original bohemian philosophy of love, frugality, and voluntary poverty. This further suggests that these movements did not arise from the interpretive culture of the '60s but from a reactionary attitude of many young Americans. This is the first sense in which Miłosz's American experience pitted him against the "collective nirvana," the collective fashions of the '60s.

In the above block quotation, Miłosz plays an important role as a visionary. He predicts that America will split into two mutually hostile parts. Journalist, publicist, and literary critic Renata Górczyńska, in her essay "*Widzenia Nad Zatoką San Francisco Po Trzydziestu Latach*" ("*Visions from San Francisco Bay Thirty Years Later*"), posits that Miłosz inaccurately predicted the bifurcation of American culture into mass culture and counterculture. In Górczyńska's assessment, although many flower children and hippies are alive today, they have quietly assimilated into society, and most radical groups have retreated from terrorism (140). One could agree with her assessment. Even though political demonstrations in times of unrest still occur, and some bohemian fashions are still present today, neither have occurred on the mass scale observed during the '60s and '70s. In this instance, Miłosz did not predict the future with foresight, allowing the audience who reads his work years later to understand that he was not an infallible "visionary." He was sharing his visions, his thoughts, as he experienced life in America, as a human. To err is human. However, his assessment of the bohemia as a fashion is insightful, as today the cultural bohemia has disintegrated, suggesting that it was indeed transitory.

Once Miłosz establishes the fact that the bohemian counterculture was nothing other than a fashion, he then characterizes it as a collective movement that seeks to create a condition of nirvana: a state of future innocence. He writes,

...there also developed an enormous underground market for "consciousness-expanding" substances; the church and synagogue were equated with the mental inertia of the older generation, and the alcohol culture was seen as the symbol of its customs; therefore, the renunciation of alcohol and its replacement by the marijuana culture had the distinct features of cementing a group, especially since absurd legislation caused the herd to acquire its prophets and martyrs. (Miłosz, *Visions* 123)

Miłosz points out that the bohemians had an overwhelming desire to expand their minds with the use of drugs. In this way, drug culture itself creates a collective nirvana. Importantly, he introduces the juxtaposition of nirvana to Biblical tradition. He notices that the bohemians replace Biblical tradition with their own prophets and martyrs (leaders and role models) and replace the Biblical mental inertia represented in the church and synagogue with their drug induced "expanded consciousness." Instead of expanding their minds by spiritual reflection and interpretation, they do so with drugs, suggesting that they are spiritually lost. Even the use of the word "herd," Miłosz's consecutive illusion to cows, implies that the bohemians are a self-directed group who follow each other blindly in trying to navigate their American reality. Like a group of

trailing cattle, they lack reference to a moral compass and the agency to practice independent reflection and deeper interpretation.

Miłosz believes the bohemians sought this new nirvana, or ideal state, as a coping mechanism to create a futuristic mental and spiritual paradise for themselves. He observed among bohemians a...

...struggle between the desire to believe and the inability to, as when you have almost caught a butterfly and ended up with a handful of air. I do not understand why we have allowed ourselves to be cowed by fashion and have relinquished important fundamental inquiries so that only churchmen, intimidated and constrained by their defenses, will at times admit to their religious troubles. (*Visions* 33)

His review of the counterculture as that of a transitory fashion reveals the state of religious trouble the bohemians developed by jumping onto the social and political bandwagon. In the process, they lost the fundamental right of inquiry. In other words, they lost the fundamental right of interpreting their reality and spirituality, leading them to hopelessly create future nirvanas for themselves with the use of conscious-expanding drugs. Notice that Miłosz is not “for Biblical tradition” simply because he is a traditionalist or unwilling to adopt a progressive mindset. Instead, by providing the mental contrast between the importance of Biblical tradition and the emerging bohemia, Miłosz encourages readers to interpret and inquire in an effort to reform their own metaphysical reality. Even though it may prove difficult, he wants us to use our imagination and the power of our thoughts, not drugs and short-lived intellectual fashions, to transform our minds.

The importance of religion in understanding one’s place within the universe is also prevalent throughout Miłosz’s poetry written during his time at Berkeley. Miłosz wrote a poem peppered with similar juxtapositions entitled “Thesis and Counter-Thesis” (*New and Collected Poems* 236).

—Love of God is love of self.

The stars and the seas are gilled by precious *I*

Sweet as a pillow and a sucked thumb.

—It would be most unflattering for adorning men

If the grasshopper chirping in the warm grass

Could glorify that attribute called *Being*

In a general manner, without referring to its own persona

Comparing the human mind to that of a grasshopper, Miłosz creates another juxtaposition, just as he did with the cow in a brutish state of contemplation in his letter to Giedroyc and in his



essay “On Censorship.” This is another example of highlighting the superior mental capacities of humans over animals in the sense that humans have an innate ability to acknowledge and interpret their reality and existence, which is tied hand in hand with acknowledging their spirituality; if one loves oneself, one loves God. The juxtaposition between the mindless fashions of the counterculture and careful spiritual reflection makes it evident how we fall short of interpreting the facts and analyzing the state of our mental and spiritual existence. This ends in great human suffering as represented in the turbulent environment of the ‘60s and ‘70s. Professor of Romantic Polish Literature Elżbieta Kiślak, in her essay “Visions from San Francisco Bay,” also recognizes the importance of Miłosz’s use of religious themes as a way of restoring man back to a position of sacral order and stability during this troubled time in American history. She agrees that Miłosz stresses the need for religion as a solution to the disintegration of religious imagination in America. In the process of doing so, it is important to note that Miłosz does not impose his Christian faith as the universal faith, but instead he invites the reader to step into a spiritual mindset, encouraging them to interpret and gain insight into their own perception of the world.

## “FOR SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY, AGAINST THE DREAMS OF PRIMEVAL INNOCENCE”

In the succeeding pro and con, Miłosz again contrasts two dissimilar notions: science and technology versus primeval innocence. First, it is important to establish what is meant by “primeval innocence.” In his essay “Agony of the West,” Miłosz makes the following statement:

...almost from its beginning, almost at its foundation, America dreamed of Arcadia, of harmonious life in concord with nature, of the self-sufficient individual, happy and honest only when he takes just as much as he needs from nature with his ax and riddle, shunning society and the always-corrupt state. Whitman too, glorified this Adam. (*Visions* 121)

Since its European colonization, America was founded as a dwelling for those looking retrospectively to a time of perfection similar to the time before the fall of man in paradise. As an observer, Miłosz develops a strong sense that Americans longed to regress in time to the state of ideal happiness that existed in the times of the perfect man, Adam. In this moment, it is pivotal to acknowledge the evolving nature of Miłosz’s juxtapositions. Although his sets of pros and cons seem to be clearly delineated and separate from one another, all of a sudden, Biblical tradition re-enters the stage and interacts with dreams of primeval innocence, which are related to both nirvana *and* science and technology. Miłosz’s style creates a unique abstraction by interconnecting these concepts on the most fundamental metaphysical level. Here, Miłosz points out two popular lines of thinking observed in American society during the ‘60s and ‘70s: individuals either looked to create a *future* state of perfection and happiness (nirvana) or to *re-create* a state of perfection before the fall of man (primeval innocence). Along these lines, Miłosz repeatedly invokes the bohemia to illustrate the juxtaposition between science and technology and the dream of primeval innocence. As he writes in “The Formless and the New,”

...for the average American citizen, at this current level, freedom from all work would threaten madness; even assuming that Adam's burden could be lifted and he could return to paradise, all the hours he had spent running around to make a living could not be filled by sex, fishing, and stamp collecting. This new movement could thus seem to be a sign of man's instinctive ability to adapt to constantly changing circumstances; the philosophical and poetic bohemians always knew how to find multitude of interesting ways to spend their time, managing without the yoke, which, in their opinion, rightly burdens the stupid squares. (Miłosz, *Visions* 126)

By devising a plethora of ways of spending time other than participating in the burgeoning American machine, the counterculture movement of the '60s and '70s created a coping mechanism for those unwilling or unable to metabolize the reality of the rapidly industrializing American lifestyle. However, Miłosz posits, even if these modern burdens were lifted, and man returned to a state of perfection, man could not possibly make up for lost time, suggesting that these efforts to return to a state of primeval innocence are futile.

Of important detail is the sentiment that part of the longing to return to primeval innocence was a desire for "harmonious life in concord with nature" (Miłosz, *Visions* 121). Miłosz warns against becoming swept up in the consolation of nature in the following excerpt from his poem "Counsels" (*New and Collected Poems* 237):

And yet the Earth merits a bit, a tiny bit, of affection.

Note that I take too seriously consolations of nature,  
and baroque ornaments, the moon, chubby clouds

(although it's beautiful when bird-cherries blossom on the banks of the Willa).

No, I would advise to keep further from Nature,

from persistent images of infinite space,

of infinite time, from snails poisoned

on a path in a garden, just like our armies.

There is so much death, and that is why affection

for pigtailed, bright-colored skirts in the wind,

for paper boats no more durable than we are...

Miłosz numbered himself among lovers of nature, to the point that when writing on its subject, he writes "Nature" with a capital N, similarly to when writing on the subject of "God," capital G. However, in the context of looking to nature for consolation and spiritual comfort, as was popular

among those looking back to a time of primeval innocence, he points out that nature is full of death, infinite, unknown spaces, and shifty stakeouts represented in the poisoned snails. Looking to the ethereal and the primeval as a spiritual compass is a dangerous and slippery slope to destruction, as the former are fragile and uncertain. For the first time, Miłosz revalues the meaning of his beloved “Nature.” Although he admires its beauty from afar, he learns not to rely on it as his sole spiritual guide. In this way, he discovers a mistrust for nature’s consolation.

Miłosz juxtaposes dreams of primeval innocence with science and technology. This juxtaposition is unique because when discussing the topic of science and technology, Miłosz cannot avoid integrating the topics of nature and God again. The main argument in his essay “On the Effects of the Natural Sciences” is that God is in nature, and nature is in man; it is impossible to separate the three. Most importantly, he acknowledges that God’s majesty and handiwork can be seen in the smallest biological processes like germination, flowering, fructification, etc. Through discovering these biological processes with the help of science and technology, mankind also discovered that he is only part of a “set of given, ready-made elements” (Miłosz, *Visions* 21).

With the development of the Theory of Evolution, Miłosz argues, man discovered that he descended from the monkey. As a result, man developed an attitude of anger and offended dignity, realizing that he is not superior to nature, rather that he *is* nature (Miłosz, *Visions* 23). Because mankind discovered the paralyzing animal in himself, he moves away from seeking harmony with nature and is forced to seek “God’s Spirit,” but according to Miłosz, God is withdrawing from the lives of modern man and is losing His attributes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (*Visions* 25). This, Miłosz suggests, causes the “Spirit” to be only human, which forces man to distinguish between good and evil *himself*. This may seem an unusual thing for such a deeply spiritual man like Miłosz to say, yet it is a humbling discovery in two ways. First, there is no need to dream of a time of primeval innocence, since man is nature himself. Second, and most importantly, the development of science and technology is valuable in the sense that, in discovering deeply held secrets about the origin of man; it forced people to interpret and discern their own realities, gain distance from religious tradition, and distinguish good from evil themselves. Faith and religion mean nothing without the ability to interpret. Mankind must experience a dramatic distancing from “the Spirit” to learn these skills. Miłosz’s juxtapositions encourage American society to revalue the truth and substance of the founding principles of American life: religion, nature, and now science. This yet again encourages the reader toward a greater interpretation of their reality.

## A CALL TO REINTERPRET AND REEVALUATE

Miłosz’s juxtapositions in *Visions from San Francisco Bay* and selected poems, both encourage greater richness of interpretations and provide insight into his deeply reflective American experience that allowed him and others to form their metaphysical world views. Although his sets of pros and cons seemed to be specifically delineated in the beginning, by way of comparative analysis, it becomes clear that not only are they contrasting, but they are also deeply interconnected. For Miłosz, God, nature, science, and man are inseparable. This points to the conclusion that Miłosz richly interpreted his *own* American experience and revalued the concepts he held dear. He discussed in detail the authority of science and the significance of the Theory of

Evolution, and the dangers of putting all trust in nature versus the benefits of re-defining one's spirituality. In the process, Miłosz encourages his readers to do the same. In reading his reflections we change our thinking. As American novelist Jonathan Safran Foer once wrote, "Good writers are pleasing, very good writers make you feel and think, great writers make you change" (Schulz ix). By creating uniquely interconnected juxtapositions to encourage Americans and readers of *Visions from San Francisco Bay* towards greater and richer interpretation, Miłosz changes our understanding of the '60s and '70s. No longer do we understand this period as a time of diversely interpretive energies, but rather as a time in American history when Americans fell away from deeper reflection and interpretation of the fundamentals of human existence. This begs the question: in today's political and social climate, are we reinterpreting and revaluing the fundamental concepts that construct the foundations of our 21<sup>st</sup> century American society?

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