

The Power of Place and Time

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Cynthia Haven, *Czesław Miłosz: A California Life*. Heyday Books, 256pp., \$26 cloth.

IT IS HARD TO IMAGINE A BIT OF Americana that is more steeped in its own mythos than California and its writers.

Geologically speaking, California formed gradually over tens of millions of years as one tectonic plate was subducted under another. Its mountain ranges separate the state into a series of distinct geographies, each with their own ecologies and environments. California's hundreds of fault lines mean that earthquakes and tremors are far from rare as plates slip and slide past each other in near-constant tectonic movement. The deep time conditions for what we've come to know as "California" were set, literally, eons before writers, poets, and thinkers explored California's basins and ranges, its gray bay mists, its redwoods, its deserts, its histories, its cultures, its California-ness—its *esse* or 'being.'

In the cadre of quintessential California writers, one would be hard-pressed to find mention of the Polish poet Czesław Miłosz. However, in her new book, *Czesław Miłosz: A California Life*, Cynthia Haven explores Miłosz's four decades living in Berkeley, California, arguing that California was foundational to Miłosz's writing

career—that Miłosz ought not to be "only" considered a Polish poet, but ought to be thought of and written about as a writer and poet shaped by the Golden State.

Czesław Miłosz: A California Life is one of a publishing initiative from Heyday called "California lives." These biographical essays center on women and men who have built California to be the entity that we think it is today—those Californians who made and spoke for the place that they live. How does Miłosz fit into that? What could be more of a California archetype, a California life, perhaps even a California cliché, Haven argues, than a mid-century émigré coming to a place that is held up as a place, a state of mind, of constant reinvention?

California for Miłosz was anything but inevitable. (Indeed, Haven lets Miłosz's words carry this sentiment with his quote, "I did not choose California. It was given to me. / What can the wet north say to this scorched emptiness?") Miłosz emigrated to America after living stateless in France for over ten years, when Berkeley's Slavonic Studies program reiterated an invitation for him to join the faculty in 1960, once the braying McCarthyism of the 1950s that had kept his U.S. visa out of reach for so long had died down.

Although Miłosz had a somewhat cantankerous relationship with the state during his time there, the state's *natura* offered an aesthetic sanctuary for the poet in exile. Miłosz's writing "raised the stakes" for American poetry, as Haven quotes Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Robert Hass saying. "Eventually, he considered himself one of us, and he wrote some of his most arresting poems about our landscape and history," Haven tells us. He also wrote deeply ambivalent poems about some of California's denizens (such as Allen

Ginsberg); he championed Robinson Jeffers when the poet had been critically rejected, although Haven describes Miłosz’s reaction to Jeffers’s work as “horror and fascination.”

Czesław Miłosz was born in 1911 to a Polish-speaking family in Lithuanian territory—what was then part of Imperial Russia. The Miłosz family set down roots in Wilno (now Vilnius), only to be displaced by the Russian Revolution, eventually settling in Szetejnie, Lithuania. Prior to World War II, he traveled to Paris, published poetry upon his return to Wilno, and began working on translating T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. He stayed in Warsaw through its destruction, eventually captured and held as in a prisoner transport camp in 1944, rescued only by chance. From 1945 to 1951, Miłosz served as a cultural attaché for Poland; he and his family moved between New York City, Washington D.C., and Paris. In 1951, Miłosz traveled to Paris and defected from Poland leaving his wife and two sons in New York City. (In 1950, his wife Janka had been pregnant and unable to return with Miłosz to Paris from the United States.) It wasn’t until 1960 that political circumstances changed enough for him to be granted a visa to the U.S.

that Miłosz’s early California writing reflects a loneliness: the solitude of being physically removed from, and unread in, his native Poland. In the subsequent decades, Miłosz’s Grizzly Peak residence became a pilgrimage of sorts for poets, writers, and translators like Robert Hass, Robert Pinsky, Lillian Vallee, and many, many others.

One of the most poignant parts of *Czesław Miłosz: A California Life* comes through the author’s own connections to Miłosz; as a Californian herself, Haven neatly inserts herself into Miłosz’s California story. (“Well, we’re all from somewhere, aren’t we?” she points out about California’s demographics when the series editor asks if Miłosz can really be considered a Californian.) While working for the *Los Angeles Times*, she was one of the first to interview Miłosz after he won the 1980 Nobel prize. In early 2000, Haven again met with Miłosz at his home (“our first meeting had to be organized with a precision and forethought that is routinely required for a space launch”) and again a few weeks later. (“It was a lucky coin in my life; they were the last media interviews he gave in America.”)

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The bulk of his literary career in California took place during his career as a tenured professor at the University of California, Berkeley, beginning with his move there in 1960. Although grateful to be reunited with his family, Haven suggests

As Haven recounts her interviews with Miłosz, she tells of asking him to expand upon the themes of *être* (“to be”) and *devenir* (“to become”) that recur in his work. (She notes that Miłosz dodges the question a bit.) What Miłosz does talk about is the

ever-revolving, the pushing and pulling of being pulled between the past and the present—a form of nostalgia. It would be easy for an author to take their Miłosz-adjacent experiences and to write it as its own bit of mawkishness, a brush with celebrity. (And what could be more California than a trope about celebrity?) In Haven's telling, however, her connections to Miłosz and his California intelligentsia are introduced in order to illustrate the social network of people and ideas built up at his Grizzly Peak residence in Berkeley, to frame how widely and deeply Miłosz's influence was—and is—felt, almost two decades after his death.

It's impossible to talk about Miłosz without talking about the Nobel, and Haven uses Miłosz's 1980 award as a fulcrum point to guide the narrative arc for Miłosz's time at Berkeley—offering readers a “before” and an “after” to Miłosz's career and writings. To contemporary readers, Miłosz's Nobel prize reads almost as a historical inevitability. (Indeed, in the Miłosz mythos that Haven recounts, there is a famous exchange between Czesław's first wife, Janka, and an official when Czesław's U.S. visa was yet again blocked in the 1950s. “You'll regret it, because he's going to win the Nobel Prize!” Janka yells.) But it's easy to forget that Miłosz saw himself in those pre-Nobel years as wandering in exile, lonely—writing, writing, wondering if anyone would read what he had written. In *A California Life*, Haven's readers come to understand just how much it cut Miłosz to not be read widely, especially in Poland.

Fundamentally, however, Miłosz had an unsettled relationship with California. Haven is quick to point out Miłosz's longstanding ambivalence to the state, even as it was his refuge from the mad calamities

of the twentieth century. (In *Visions from San Francisco Bay*, Miłosz himself wrote “Our species is now on a mad adventure. We are flung into a world which appears to be a nothing, or, at best, a chaos of disjointed masses we must arrange in some order.”) Haven builds each chapter as a bibliographic essay, complex and dense with names, stories, and connections—so much so that it's hard to imagine someone unfamiliar with Miłosz's life picking this up as their first foray into Miłosz's work.

“California shaped Miłosz's thinking, and in ways that we haven't fully recognized or acknowledged,” Haven argues. “Perhaps the reason is that California itself is not understood.” At first glance, the two geographic threads in Miłosz's life—California and Eastern Europe—appear to be at odds with each other in everything from history, to language, to time, to nature. The underlying bedrock of each, so to speak, is so incomparable and so removed from each other that these two worlds might seem to be two tectonic plates slipping, sliding, and subducting against each other. These two worlds “transfigured him from a poet writing from one corner of the world to a poet who could speak for all of it,” Haven notes, “from a poet focused on history to a poetry concerned with modernity and who, always, had his eyes fixed on forever.”

After the fall of communism in Poland, Miłosz began to divide his time between Berkeley and Kraków. When Miłosz died in Kraków in 2004, California became a middle ground in the geography of his life and writing, representing the possibilities of a new home and the power of place to shape and inform aesthetic sensibilities. *Czesław Miłosz: A California Life* reminds us of the power of place and time.