

## An Invisible Rope

### Portraits of Czesław Miłosz

Edited by Cynthia L. Haven. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press ([www.ohioswallow.com](http://www.ohioswallow.com)), 2011. 280 pages. ISBN 978-0-8040-1155-4. Paper.

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When Czesław Miłosz died in 2004, the world lost one of our great poets. What remains are his words and, in this engaging collection of essays, we have the words of those who knew Miłosz. The authors include friends, colleagues, students, and translators, and the book follows a roughly chronological order, beginning with those who knew Miłosz earliest, such as Elizabeth Kridl Valkeneir—her essay begins with the line “I first knew Czesław Miłosz when I was a child before World War II” in Wilno (10), and progressing toward the final interview with Robert Hass. These thirty-two essays, collected and edited by Cynthia L. Haven, range from the very short which function almost as summaries of his life (“The Exile Who Rejected Pathos”), to anecdotes, to memoirs. There is also an interview conducted by the editor with former U. S. Poet Laureate Hass about his encounters with Miłosz.

One of the strengths of this collection is that the book is honest—it is not a tribute to Czesław Miłosz the Nobel Laureate with writers gushing over the poet in glowing terms, but more a collection of portraits that capture the true man: brilliant, difficult, warm, complex. Daniel Halpern says in his very brief anecdote “Miłosz at Chez Panisse” that Miłosz was “awesome and scary, at times sweet and uncle-ish, affable, and . . . irritable, a man ready to negate the patch of earth you stood on” (164).

Most of the essays are personal memories of Miłosz, and some of the most delightful are from those who knew him longest. I found these earlier essays the most compelling: in them, we glimpse the poet in his early years. In the essay “An Epistolary Friendship,” George Gömöri writes that the great poet’s Berkeley lectures were “very entertaining, especially when he discussed contemporaries, people whom he had known personally” (24). There is something of that quality in this book which is akin to eavesdropping on social

gathering of Czesław Miłosz and his friends reminiscing over good food and drink. Some of the details in the essays are intriguing, such as Marek Skwarnicki’s story about receiving a lost package sent by Miłosz in 1964. The gift, which included poems and sketches, did not reach Skwarnicki until 2002 when Miłosz handed it over in person in Kraków. This essay in particular, titled “Half a Century with Miłosz,” is a beautiful testament to a long friendship and was one of my favorites in the book. “Love at Last Sight” by Richard Lourie, a translator of Miłosz’s work, is another tale of a long friendship, beginning rather inauspiciously with Lourie as a student whose work is singled out in class, and not positively. The essay ends years later in Kraków, just two years before the poet’s death. It is a lovely essay, full of warmth and humor.

Many of these early essays seem more substantial than some of the middle ones, but perhaps that is just this reader’s taste. Some of the shorter essays, gossipy and full of the intrigues of academia and publishing, seemed to be more about the authors of the essays than about Miłosz, and I found these less compelling. A memorable later piece is Judith Tannenbaum’s “Miłosz at San Quentin,” a memoir about the Nobel Laureate’s visit to her creative writing class in the prison. This essay is more than an anecdote, it is a beautifully written memoir that includes Miłosz and ponders the big questions the poet himself was also concerned with as he talks to the inmates about the nature of good and evil.

Overall, *An Invisible Rope* is a very strong collection, and what it gives a reader is a sense of the man, more than of his work, though a few writers, like Seamus Heaney and Joanna Zach, do focus beautifully on poetry. Still, this is not meant to be a collection about Miłosz’s poetry per se; this is a collection of remembrances about the man himself, and, it is an eminently readable book. While it would be useful for students of poetry, I could see the collection appealing to anyone with an interest in the nature of art and genius. In his essay “In Gratitude for All the Gifts,” Seamus Heaney notes that “with Miłosz gone, the world has lost a credible witness to this immemorial belief in the saving power of poetry.” But along with the power of Miłosz’s own words, we have this collection, and these fragments of memory create a captivating and human portrait of the poet and his life. ▲