
Milosz's ABCs by Czeslaw Milosz, translated by Madeline G. Levine (2001), 313 pages.



The publisher's release informs that "the ABC book is a Polish genre, a literary form loosely composed of short, alphabetically arranged entries." The original book was published in 1998 under the title *Abecadło Miłosza*, and our Library has a copy. Dr. Levine, a Harvard graduate, holds the same academic position at the University of North Carolina that Miłosz held at Berkeley in California. Her translation is excellent.

The ABC genre is not the best literary invention. It lets the author write about just everything under the sun in short spurts, sometimes only a page. The order of these tiny chapters breaks the book's contents in capricious manner; the reader is forced to re-focus his attention from one field to another every few minutes: a biographical entry full of details changes into a philosophical discourse, soon followed by a linguistic observation, suddenly interrupted by tourist information. An index of these 150 tiny chapters would be of great help to the reader so that he could select material of interest to himself. A good introduction by the author to the English-speaking audience would make this work more reader-friendly.

The book is a form of memoir spanning many decades of the author's long life. The many biographical sketches are actually tributes to people whom Miłosz met and holds in high esteem. It is not surprising that most of them lived in the 30s and 40s of the last century. The reader will surely see some of the names for the first time, but others played a prominent role in their respective literary circles, including Borejsza, Baczyński, Maria Dąbrowska, Stefan Kisielewski, Manfred Kridl, and Zofia Nałkowska in Poland, and Simon de Beauvoir, Camus, Arthur Koestler, and Jacques Maritain in Western Europe.

Of special interest are small chapters dealing with philosophical musings on such general subjects as ambition, biography, blasphemy, capitalism, cruelty, fame, hatred, money, prejudice, stupidity, and terror. Frequently the reader is likely to disagree with Miłosz as his opinions are often idiosyncratic and sound magisterial. In other instances, they are, however, perceptive, such as a simple explanation why the French feared World War II: they still had a vivid recollection of the millions of their countrymen slaughtered in the trenches of the previous War and, surely, they did not want their beloved Paris destroyed.

It is somewhat puzzling why the chapter on Prof. Francis Whitfield at the Berkeley campus of the University of California is discussed in such a curt manner. He was the sponsor of Miłosz by inviting him to teach in America, thus most dramatically changing the author's life. He became a tenured professor although he did not have a doctorate. - - Also, forty years in California should have been better recalled, beyond wisecracks about the famous redwoods or a contemptuous reference to Los Angeles. - - To be sure, the author's countrymen do not always get approval, either, particularly the Polish diaspora; neither does their music: "I think Polish folk music is pitiful, the *krakowiak* and *oberek* dances make me laugh, Chopin irritates me." As the French wisely say: *Chacun a son gout*.

George Suboczewski