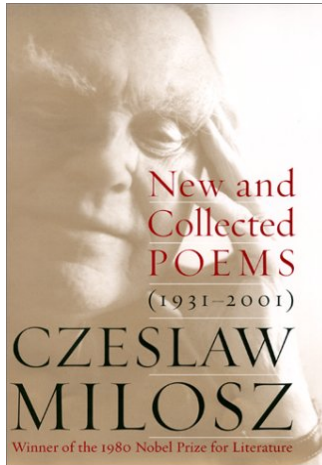

New and Collected Poems 1931-2001 by Czesław Miłosz (2001), 776 pages.



This is not a small volume of poems one may want to read on the beach while taking a Florida vacation. Instead, it is a heavy tome of 400 poems, which is not for the fainthearted or for casual lovers of literature who have no particular inclination to spend much time on rather overwhelming material; all of it is in translation.

Of course, our Library has most Miłosz's Polish writings in verse and in prose. The author states that he only reluctantly agreed to write a few paragraphs of introduction, even though this is a condensed presentation of his life's work offered to the English-speaking public, and so ought to be reader-friendly. It would have been helpful to include commentary, placing these poems in some historical context; they were written within the period of 70 years. As it is, it is really difficult to appraise Miłosz. An academic expert might have provided such comment, even if the author himself was not interested.

Miłosz's poetry is free-form, in contrast with rhymed verse or blank verse (iambic pentameter) favored by many English poets, especially Shakespeare. For inexperienced readers, free verse poses a stumbling block, as there seems to be no structural order. Bi-lingual readers may also find free verse disappointing since they are spoiled by the Polish poetry masters of the 18th and 19th centuries. Some readers may remember the words of Robert Frost that "Poetry without rhyme is like playing tennis without a net." To be sure, this is a personal opinion that can be challenged. Indeed, there are experts who know more about poetry, and the dust jacket contains admiring testimonials. For example, Joseph Brodsky describes Miłosz as "one of the greatest poets of our time," who possesses a "relentless mind" resembling that of the biblical character Job (in Polish *Hiob*). There are indeed *hiobowe wieści* that Miłosz refers to in his work, which is deeply entangled in his philosophical attitude permeating it. He quotes the German philosopher Adorno to the effect that after World War II lyrical poetry is impossible. This may be an exaggeration as life will go on, and people quickly forget history. Still, the somber tone and gloomy view mark many poems of this author, and readers who are optimistic by nature will have difficulty accepting hundreds of reflections attesting to man's sad fate.

In perusing this collection, one is occasionally puzzled to find very short presentations such as these:

In "From my Dentist IS T4indow" : "Extraordinary. A House. Tall. Surrounded by air. It stands. In the middle of a blue sky." (page 649)

In "Autumn": "Cathedral of my enchantments, autumn wind, I grew old giving thanks." (page 650)

To be sure, most poems in this book are not as self-centered as the above examples. Besides, the publishers openly appeal to libraries to purchase this \$45 book, implying that it is a reference work.

George E. Suboczewski