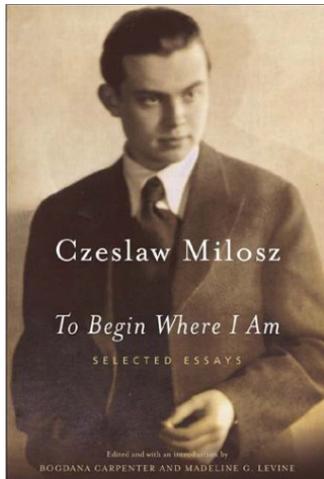


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**To Begin Where I Am: Selected Essays** by Czesław Miłosz (2001) 462 pages.



Two scholars joined hands in editing this volume: Bogdana Carpenter of the University of Michigan and Madeline G. Levine of the University of North Carolina. It is a very thoughtful selection of some 40 essays lifted from many books by Miłosz; they are of considerable interest to the English speaking reader. The essays are divided into three distinct parts that clearly relate to different stages of Miłosz's writing career. This short review can mention only some of the material, which, as always, contains strong views so characteristic of the writer. Perhaps recollections of Wilno are too detailed, but he enjoys telling us how he avidly read Żeromski and "other bad literature" as a youngster; he also observes that the Polish soul has an exceptionally rich underpinning of kitsch. Of course, he is entitled to his own opinions. - - The essay *Journey to the West* recounts the trip in 1931 from Prague to Paris, mainly by a canoe, with two companions, all of whom get lost through their ignorance and a lack of a sense of organization. Once in Paris, his Francophile uncle Oscar Miłosz warns the young nephew to avoid negative comments about the country and curtly reminds him that even the gas pipe repairman across the street represents two thousand years of

French civilization.

It is impossible here to give justice to lengthy discussions of religion or philosophy in which Miłosz frequently engages. Highlights of some of the author's recollections stand out, however. For example, he recalls how the prominent pre-war theater director Leon Schiller became a dogmatic Communist by day while prostrating himself before the crucifix at night. Substantial attention is given to Jerzy Andrzejewski, the author's good friend, whose changing political allegiances after the war make one's head spin. Miłosz's recollection of his four and a half years at the Polish Embassy in Washington D.C. is quite grim. He felt like a dog on a leash and took frequent naps to "separate myself from this nonsense." Still, this was a controversial period in the author's life as the Embassy was totally boycotted by Polonia after 1945.

Of course, his leftist political views were known in the 1930s when the social-economic order of that period was his adversary. Some readers will disagree with his statement that the pre-war Polish intelligentsia was "a stratum never known in Western Europe, not to mention Anglo-Saxon countries." In reality it was not some weird social order but the growth of a middle class that had begun during era of the Positivism. The West had had a middle class for many generations. - - The slow conversion had had a middle class for many generations. The slow conversion of Miłosz probably began during his visits to Warsaw from Washington, where he saw people in the street who looked wild, their eyes were fixed, and they generally wore rags, thanks to the new economic order. This realization led him to the radical change of views in the 1950s.

The last part of the essays contains an elaborate discourse on the Seven Cardinal Sins, recently included in *Miłosz's ABC* as well as lengthy ruminations about literature that include comments about T.S.Vliot, Robert Frost, Pasternak, Brodsky, Simone Weil, Shestov, and Dostoyevski. This segment will appeal to literary aficionados. To sum up, this is a commendable job of the editors, who also supplied excellent End Notes.

**George E. Suboczewski**