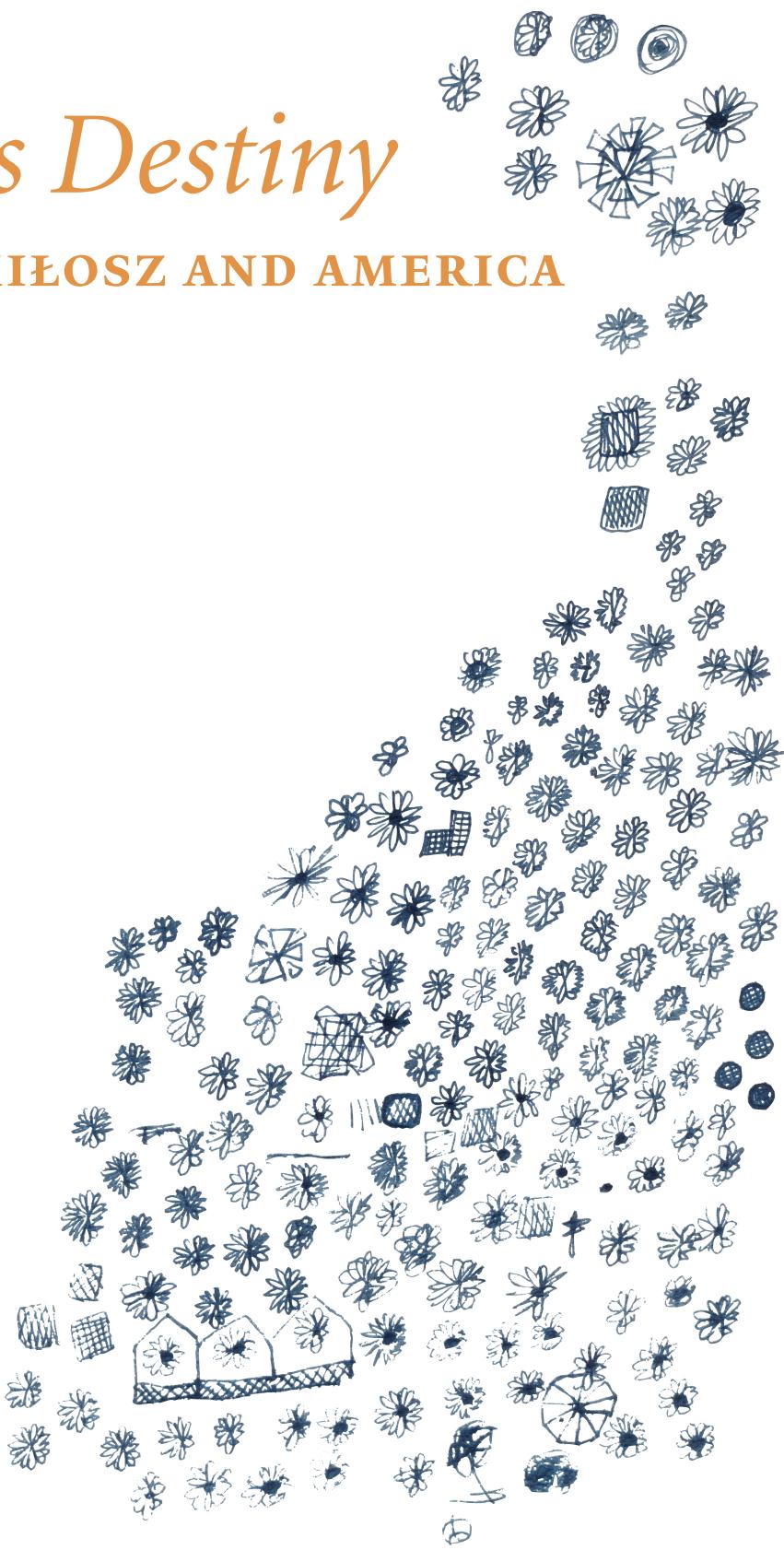
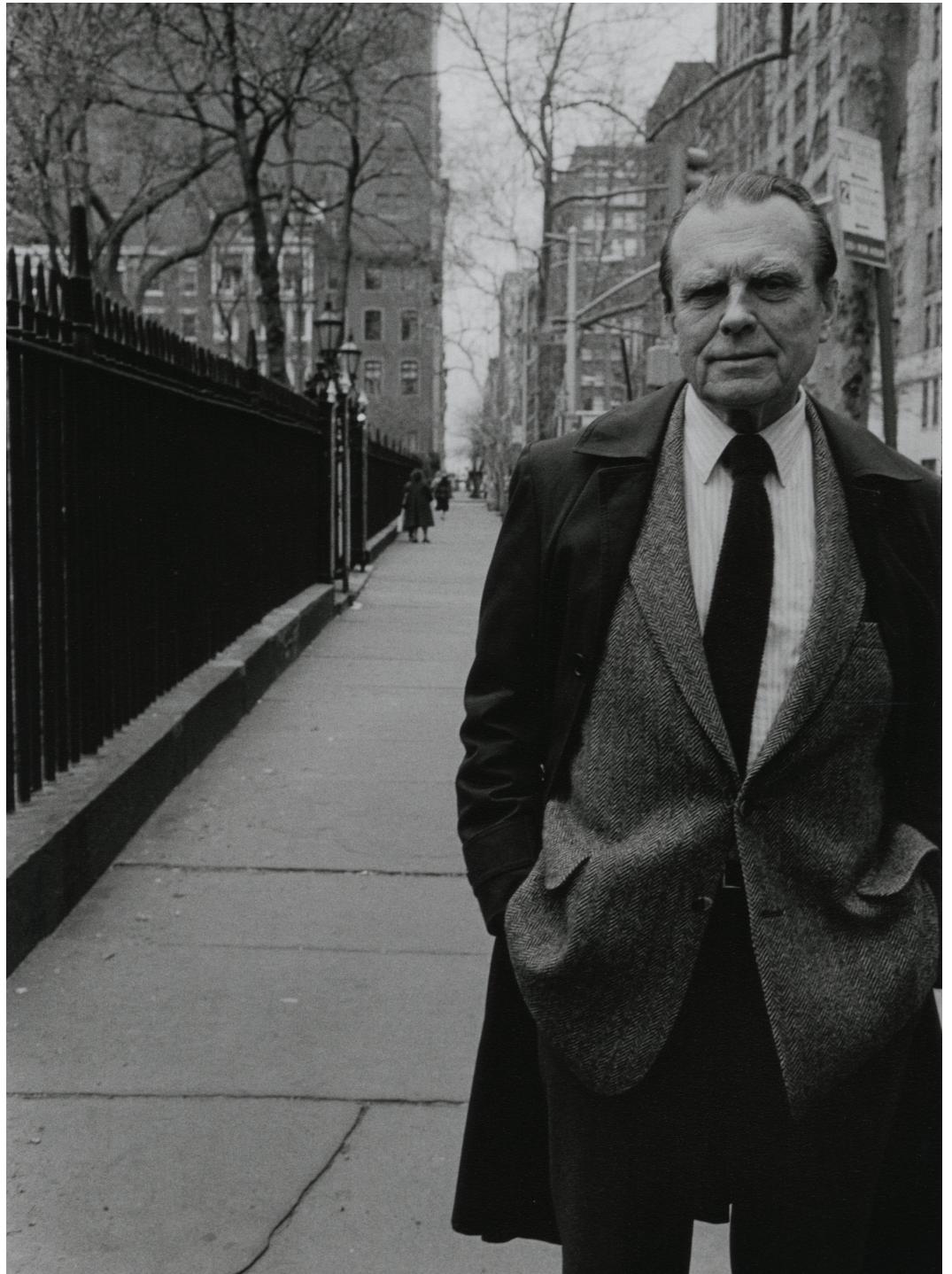


# *Exile as Destiny*

CZESŁAW MIĘOSZ AND AMERICA





## Miłosz and America

*America for me has the pelt of a raccoon  
Its eyes are a raccoon's black binoculars.*

— from “A Treatise on Poetry,” originally published in Polish as “Traktat poetycki,” 1957. English version from *New and Collected Poems*

The life of Czesław Miłosz (1911–2004), Polish poet, novelist, diplomat, and Nobel laureate, spanned a century of political upheavals and societal turmoil and was situated in pre-Revolutionary Russia, cosmopolitan Vilnius, Nazi-occupied Warsaw, the Paris of exiled literati, and the United States, from a perch atop the Berkeley hills with a stunning view of San Francisco Bay. The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library celebrates the centennial of Czesław Miłosz, renowned author of *Bells in Winter*, *The Captive Mind*, and *Native Realm*, with an exhibition drawn from the library’s holdings. The manuscripts and photographs on display document Miłosz’s great works of literature and also reveal lesser-known aspects of his multifaceted relationship with America, with his adopted home of California, with fellow émigré authors, and with the English language. Miłosz was inspired by the alien American landscape yet dismissive of the superficiality of his students’ sense of history. He languished for lonely decades yet eventually flourished as an international star, his success buoyed by collaboration with American translators. Ultimately Miłosz thrived in America but never loved it; he returned to Poland for his final years and died in Kraków in 2004.

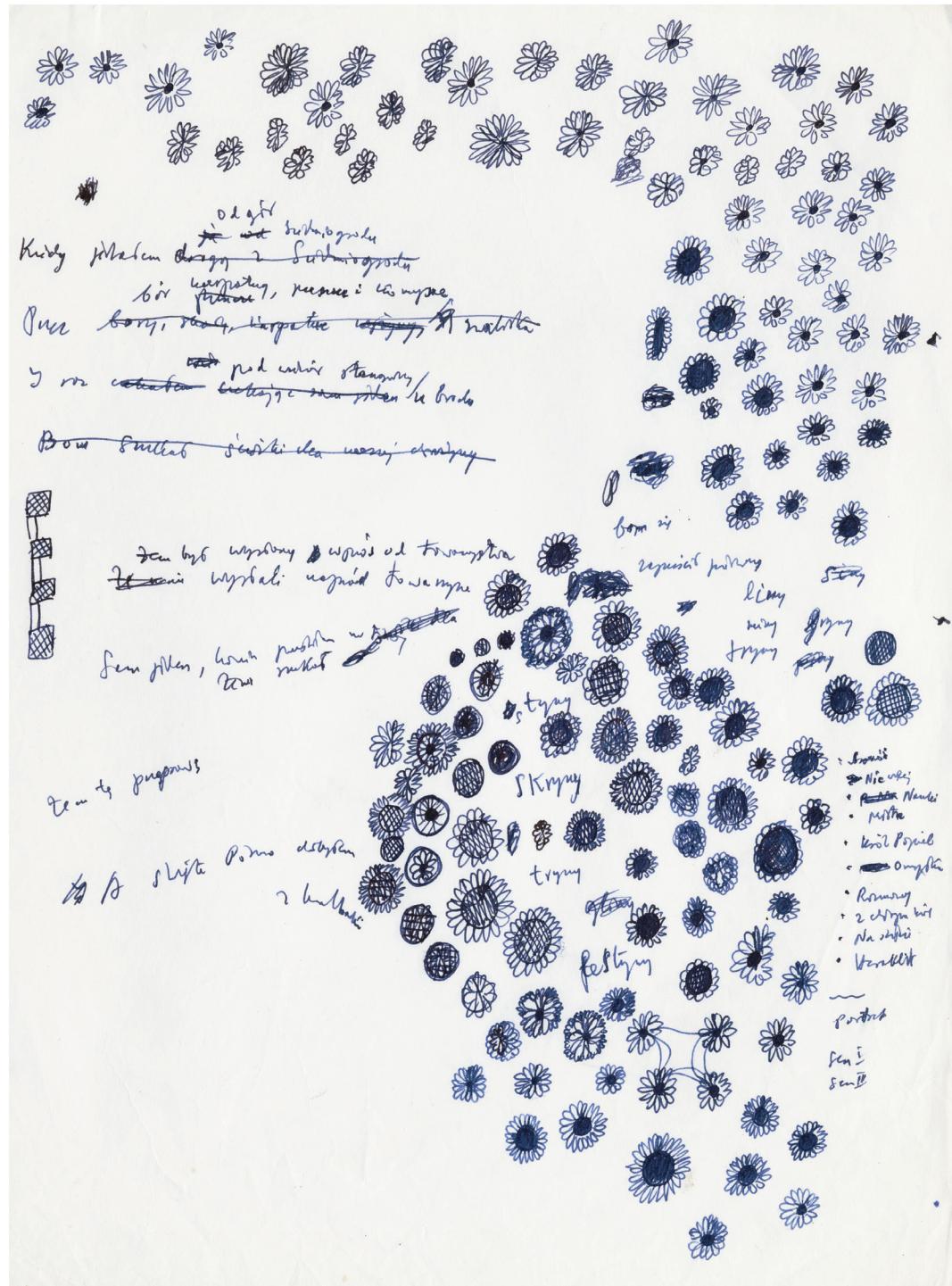


## Emigration

*Exile accepted as a destiny, in the way we accept an incurable illness, should help us see through our self delusions.*

— from “Notes on Exile,” 1976

Emigration was not an event for Miłosz, but rather a devastating fifteen-year process. He first came to America in the winter of 1945–46 not as a world-renowned poet, but as a low-ranking diplomat. He served the postwar government of the People’s Republic of Poland for five years: in the New York consulate, in the Washington, D.C., embassy, and, briefly, in Paris. Because of his differences with the Polish government, which he viewed as totalitarian, his political standing became increasingly precarious, and he defected in France in February 1951. The conflict between his personal values and those of the government he served led



him to characterize his diplomatic years as “backbreaking, unbelievable, illogical, immoral, indescribable” (*A Year of the Hunter*, 116).

Miłosz’s situation in 1951 was isolating and frustrating. As a defector who rejected the Polish Communist government, he was spurned by leftist European intellectuals who idealized Marxism. As a former employee of a Communist government, he appeared suspicious to the United States government, which was rooting out “Reds” under the auspices of the 1950 McCarran Act. His diplomatic service also tainted him in the eyes of Polish émigrés who had fled the oppressiveness of the government he served. Worst of all, when he was transferred to Paris in 1950, he had to leave his son, Tony, and wife, Janina – then pregnant with their second child, John Peter – in the United States. After defecting, he was denied a visa to enter the United States, and the family was separated on opposite sides of the Atlantic. It was not until 1953 that they were finally united in France, where they remained until 1960, when Miłosz became a professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of California, Berkeley.

Despite personal and political upheavals, the 1950s were a productive decade for Miłosz, and he established an extraordinary international reputation as a novelist, poet, and cultural critic. Though Miłosz never considered himself to be a prose writer, it was his novels that thrust him into the international spotlight. *The Captive Mind* (1953) and *The Seizure of Power* (first published in French as *La Prise du Pouvoir* in 1953) examined the moral and psychological pressures of literary life under a repressive totalitarian regime, providing context for his decision to defect and exposing the conditions endured by his literary colleagues in Poland.

Exile, as both a theme and a word, is often encountered in Miłosz’s writing. From the 1950s to the 1980s he was a *persona non grata* in Polish officialdom, but even from childhood he had felt acutely his status as an outsider. He was born not in Poland but in Lithuania, to Polish gentry, and thus belonged to a class apart from the Lithuanian people who worked and lived on his family’s land. From birth he oriented himself within a tangled network of national, ethnic, religious, and linguistic relationships as he navigated through the social and political tumult of Eastern Europe in the first half of the twentieth century.

Miłosz lived in Western Europe and the United States for half a century, yet he clung tenaciously to his native nation and language. He preferred that his writing be translated into French and English rather than discard Polish as his medium. His slow and difficult acceptance of exile was a chronic condition with which he struggled for decades, always remaining defiantly, unequivocally Polish.

## Patronage

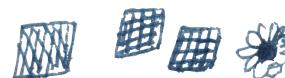
*The first months of exile are very hard. They shouldn't be taken as a measure of what is to come.*

—Letter from Czesław Miłosz to Joseph Brodsky, 1972. Originally written in Russian. From the Joseph Brodsky Papers

California was a stable home for Miłosz and his family for forty years. Once established at the University of California, Miłosz often reached out to other Eastern European writers. One such writer was Aleksander Wat, a Polish Futurist who suffered immensely in Soviet prisons before finding refuge in France, where he lived from 1959 until his suicide in 1967. While Wat's career had been thwarted for decades during the Second World War and the Soviet era, Miłosz recognized the importance of Wat's experience and made it possible for him to record his groundbreaking memoir, *Mój wiek* (*My Century*), in the form of audiotaped conversations.

Miłosz helped other Eastern European émigré authors establish themselves in the United States and overcome the initial alienating years of exile. Among these authors were Lithuanian poet Tomas Venclova and fellow Nobel laureate and Russian émigré Joseph Brodsky. Miłosz wrote Brodsky a friendly and comforting letter soon after his emigration in 1972, reassuring him that it is possible to write in exile and suggesting that Brodsky translate Miłosz's poetry into Russian as a way of remaining poetically engaged.

## Polish literature in the world



*Wrong Honorable Professor Milosz*

*Who wrote poems in some unheard-of tongue*

—from “Magic Mountain,” originally published in Polish in *Hymn o Perle*, 1982. English version from *New and Collected Poems*

Miłosz is uniquely responsible for making Polish poetry accessible to English-language audiences, beginning with the anthology *Postwar Polish Poetry* (1965) and continuing with *The History of Polish Literature* (1969). Miłosz considered translation integral to a poet's work and practiced it throughout his life. He produced English translations of poetry by Zbigniew Herbert, Aleksander Wat, and Anna Świrszczyńska. He also opened world literature to Polish readers, translating

British, American, European, Chinese, and Japanese poetry into Polish. He undertook the monumental task of translating portions of the Bible, learning Hebrew and Greek for the purpose, and his translations are still among those versions of the Bible most commonly printed in Poland. In the United States, Miłosz was continuously confronted by the fact that Polish literature was little known in American circles, but his efforts and, eventually, his fame, brought increasing prominence to Polish poetry.

## The Czesław Miłosz Papers

*He had his home, posthumous, in the town of New Haven,  
In a white building, behind walls  
Of translucent marble like turtle shell,*

—from “Beinecke Library,” originally published in Polish in *Dalsze Okolice*, 1991. English version from *New and Collected Poems*

The Czesław Miłosz Papers at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library were acquired by gift and purchase from 1966 to 2001. The papers consist of writings, correspondence, photographs, personal papers, audio material, and printed material (including newspaper clippings, printed ephemera, and clandestine samizdat publications), spanning the years 1880–2000, with the bulk of the material dating from 1940 to 1989. While some writings, photographs, and personal documents predate the Second World War, the earliest correspondence dates from 1946. The papers are accompanied at the Beinecke by the papers of other East European émigré authors, including those of Joseph Brodsky, Witold Gombrowicz, Tomas Venclova, and Aleksander Wat.

Lisa Conathan  
archivist and exhibition curator  
Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library



*Beinecke Library*

He had his home, posthumous, in the town of New Haven,  
In a white building, behind walls  
Of translucent marble like turtle shell,  
Which seep yellowish light on ranges of books,  
Portraits and busts in bronze. There precisely  
He decided to dwell when nothing any more  
Would be revealed by his ashes. Though there, too,  
Had he been able to touch his manuscripts  
He would have been surprised by the destiny  
Of such a complete change into letters, that no one  
Could guess who he really was. He rebelled, screamed  
And faithfully fulfilled what had been preordained,  
Discovering empirically that his biography  
Had been carefully arranged against his will  
By powers with whom it's hard to conclude an alliance.  
Has he done more evil or more good? This only  
Must be important. The rest, artistry,  
Does not count anyway, as they, our posterity, know  
Any time the pulse is normal, breathing easy,  
The day sunny, and a rosy tongue  
Checks in a little mirror the dense carmine of the lip.

*Beinecke Library*

Swój dom pośmiertny miał w mieście New Haven,  
W białym budynku, którego ściany  
Z przezroczystego marmuru, jak gdyby szyldkretu,  
Sączą żółtawe światło na półki z książkami,  
Portrety i popiersia z brązu. Tam właśnie  
Postanowił zamieszkać, kiedy jego popiół  
Niczego już nie wyjawi. Choć i tutaj,  
Gdyby mógł dotknąć swoich rękopisów  
Byłby zdziwiony tak wielką przemianą  
Losu w litery, że nikt nie odgadnie  
Kim był naprawdę. Buntował się, krzyczał,  
I spełniał wiernie, co było sądzone.  
Empirycznie poznawał, że jego życiorys  
Starannie układały nie po jego woli  
Moce, z którymi trudno wejść w alianse.  
Czy więcej zła czy dobra wyrządził? To jedno  
Byłoby chyba ważne. Tamto, artyzm  
I tak niewiele znaczy, jak wiedzą, potomni,  
Jeżeli równe tępno, oddech lekki,  
Dzień jest słoneczny i różowy język  
Sprawdza w lusterku ciemny karmin wargi.



## Images

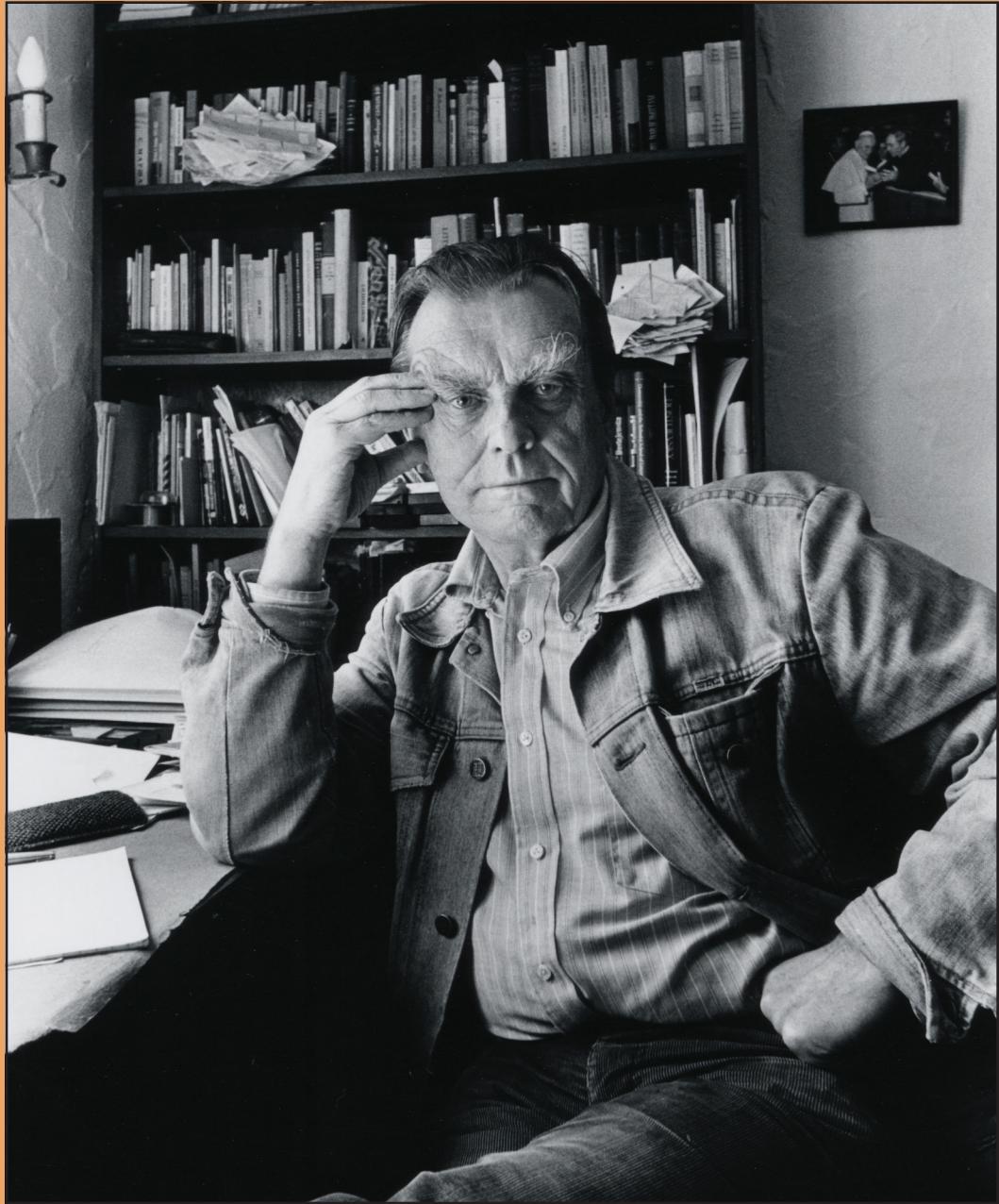
Czesław Miłosz doodles, autograph manuscript. From the Czesław Miłosz Papers  
Photograph of Czesław Miłosz. © 1983 Czesław Czaplinski

“Dzwony w zimie,” draft, autograph manuscript. From the Czesław Miłosz Papers  
Certificat de Réfugié for Czesław Miłosz, 1957. From the Czesław Miłosz Papers  
Photograph of Czesław Miłosz in Berkeley, California. © 1980 Janet Fries

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