**The Issa Valley**

The motto of our meeting today is: ‘The man and the world around’ and in particular: ‘The man and the mysteries of the world ‘.

Therefore, we have chosen something really special, which is three extracts from a very famous book by Polish Nobel Prize Winner, novelist and poet, Czesław Miłosz. He had spent his last years in Cracow and his last lecture, given here in our city, was titled “Naturalist”, which may seem strange but Miłosz explained his reasons. He spoke about his childhood, his desire to become a naturalist, his fascination with nature. Initially, when he was a child, this passion was a bit naïve. The only thing he perceived was pure beauty, a kind of paradise he was allowed to live in and enjoy. With time his interest became deeper and more mature. He started noticing the rules of the world around, often ruthless and cruel. Nature seemed to him both an aggressor and a victim[Latin names here are: *natura devorans* (devouring) and *natura devorata* (devoured)]. It was nothing else but a never-ending battle for survival. However, the variety of species, forms, the shapes and colours of particular creatures make the man admire the fragile and short-lived beauty of every being, just because it lasts so short.

Miłosz wrote his ‘Issa Valley’ in a very difficult period of his life. It was just then when he took a decision to stay in France, outside Eastern Block. No wonder he was regarded as a traitor by Polish authorities. He started to feel he was losing his readers, those who could understand him and who looked at the world the way he looked. He couldn’t write poems. What does a poet without readers mean?

And then his childhood came to help. He returned to the beginnings of the 20th century, and there, in his small Polish-Lithuanian motherland he tried to find things allowing him to survive. ‘Issa Valley’ is a novel about Tomasz, a child living somewhere in the countryside of Lithuania, exploring nature, the world and himself.

The first extract we have chosen is the description of a herbarium which Tomasz is producing gradually. He dries plants with the aim of saving them. It is their only chance to survive, as he can see it. Surprisingly, he chooses only those most difficult ones, those which are almost impossible to preserve. They are the plants from wetland areas. Why does he do so? To emphasize the flimsiness of genuine beauty?

The second extract is about birds and Tomasz’s great interest here. As it was with plants, he also tries to preserve them from the passing. Impressed by their natural beauty as well as plenty sophisticated Latin names, he creates his own Book of Birds.

The third extract makes a really special story. Somewhere in the woods Tomasz spots a squirrel and so much enchanted with its beauty tries to find a way to preserve the creature forever. It is impossible, though, and his attempts lead to a tragic ending.

So, let’s begin.

**Plants**

Thomas was content to devote himself to less practical work: the collection of various species.

He had a weakness for orchids, which contained all the magic of creatures inhabiting warmer and more humid climates, being for northern regions emissaries of the tropical south. First there was the stem, the meatiness of their green bodies, contiguous with flowers concealing a multibranched candelabrum and smelling vaguely of something rotten, wild, so faintly that their fragrance had to be inhaled long enough to be named – alas, it was unnamable. In June they dotted the grasslands along the Issa, at that time of year when vapor rose from the floodwaters of the river deltas, still awash with silt and the decay of bulrushes, to mingle with the bright green efflorescence. The speckled orchid, a pale lilac-hued cone flecked with dark violet, was hard to catch in full bloom because it was immediately touched by the rust of decay. Thomas would kneel down and carve out the black earth with his pocketknife. (…) Carefully, he would lift the soil and slip out the bulb with its rough, fingerlike protrusions. Bursting from the bulb, the orchid rushed forth to meet the sun, then remained in darkness till the following year. Pressed between sheets of cardboard, the orchid gradually took on a rusty hue; the bulb began to flatten and assume the most bizarre configurations.

The white orchid had a purity of color that in summer twilight was as luminescent as the white of the narcissus. A meadow full of orchids became, in the evening mist, a meadow inhabited by diminutive phantoms. But, when dried, the white orchid lost all its charm, retaining only its slender, roan design. The same was true of the arum. He soon discovered that plants growing in dry regions kept perfectly, undergoing hardly any discoloration, though he felt a greater attraction for the luxurious plants that thrived the wet, humid places. Even insects, armor-plated and quick of movement, bustling in hot sand and a riot of roots, lacked interest. The jungle – now that was a place for him! Why was it that a superabundance of light always resulted in a diminishment of being?

From among the many inhabitants of the sand dunes, Thomas collected only mulleins, though they were too long for the herbarium and had to be bent zigzag fashion. Needless to say, he hunted most passionately for those flowers described by his guidebook as rare. Ad just because it was so rare, he especially treasured a globeflower (*Trollius*) – of the crowfoot family, similar to a yellow rose – plucked among some oaks by the cemetery.

**Birds**

Thomas, after retreating to his grandmother's room or, when he could bear her lamentations no more, to the dining-room lamp, began compiling a notebook, or rather a scrapbook, having the shape and feel of an actual book. Cutting sheets of paper to the size, he glued the margins together and bound them with a cardboard cover inscribed with the word *Birds.* Anyone taking the libery to pry (which no one ever did, not wanting to risk Thomas's contempt, since confidentiality was the very heart and soul of the enterprise) would have found the series of headings, capitalized and underlined, followed by ornithological descriptions in small-case letters. Mastering his tendency to scribble – tongue out, pen laboriously at work – was no small feat, But in the end his efforts were rewarded: the execution, as a whole, was flawless.

Take the section on woodpeckers. Naturally, the one that held him in the greatest thrall was the large, spectled woodpecker, frequently sighted in the park in winter. This large, redheaded woodpecker was a lone species, hence:

”The dappled woodpecker – *Picus leucotos L.*” And underneath: ”Inhabits deciduous forests with lots of rotting trees and ancient coniferous forests. Winters near human habitations.”

Or:

”The black woodpecker – *Picus martius L.*” Largest of the woodpecker family. Black with a red patch on the head. Nest in pine or birch forests.:

Thomas had spotted a black woodpecker at Borkuny – not close up, since it was impossible to view at close range, but as it streaked among the birch trunks, its shrill *kri-kri-kri* carrying.

He had no way of knowing, of course, that the L., or Latinized ”Linni”, was in honor of the Swedish naturalist Linneus, the first bird taxonomist. Yet he scrupulously guarded before allowing any discrepancies between other taxonomies and his own, Latin names appealing to him because of their sonority: *Emberiza citrinella* for yellowhammer, *Turdus pilaris* for fieldfare, *Garrulus glandarius* for jay, and so on. Some of the names were conspicuous for their proliferation of letters, forcing his eyes to jump continuesly from his notebook to the antiquated ornithology at his elbow. Even the longer names, if repeated often enough, acquired a pleasant lilt, one of them, that of the common nutcracker, being absolutely magical: *Nucifraga caryocatactes*.

The notebook proved that Thomas had the gift of concentrating on things that excited him. To name a bird, to cage it in letters, was tantamount to owning it forever. The endless multiplicity of colors, shadings, mating calls, trills, wing sounds... Turning the pages, he had them all before him, at his command, affecting and ordering the plenitude of things that were. In reality, everything about birds gave rise to unease. Was it enough, he wondered, to verify their existence? The way the light modulated their feathers in flight, the warm, yellow flesh lining the bills of the young feeding in deeply sequestered nests, suffused him with the feeling of communion. Yet, for many, they were little more than a mobile decoration, scarcely worthy of scrutiny, whereas, surrounded by such wonders on earth, people should have concentrated their whole lives to contemplating only one thing: felicity.

**Squirrel**

One day he yelded to temptation, and forever regretted it. In the crown of a hazel he observed a shimmering, coil-like movement, half in green and half in light. It was a squirrel, the horizontal advance making it appear more elongated, more magically iridescent. From the lower branches came the wailing of small birds: the squirrel was raiding a nest. Unable to restrain himself, driven by sheer love for the animal, he fired.

It was a young one, so slender that what he had taken for a squirrel was not a squirrel but the shimmer of color deposited in its wake. Its body bending and unbending on the moss, it clutched its chest with its tiny paws, at the bloody patch on its little white vest. It didn't know what death was; it was trying to remove it, as if it were a spike on which it had been impaled and around which it could only pivot.

Thomas, his face twisted with anguish, knelt beside it and wept. How to stop it, how to stop it. He would have given half a lifetime to save it, but could only participate passively in the agony, the mere sight of which was a punishment. He bent down, and the paws, with their minuscule fingers, became joined as if imploring his help. He took it in his hands, and while he might otherwise have felt an urge to kiss and pet it, his lips were now clamped shut, because it was no longer the urge of possession that welled up in him but of self-sacrifice – for it, the squirrel – and was clearly beyond his power.

The hardest thing to endure was the littleness of it, and the writhing, like quicksilver trying to defer the moment of congealment. And for a brief moment, so brief he immediately lot access to it, a mystery unfolded. Then the writhing turned to convulsive jerks; the fluffy down on its cheeks was permeated by a dark trickle. The spasms slackened. Dead.

He sat on the stump, the drone of the forest in his ears. A second ago it had been alive, playing, gathering nuts. (…)

A being, unique, never to be repeated, never to be resurrected. Because it was itself and no other. But where had they gone – the warmth, the suppleness, and above all the feeling of being itself? (…) Maybe a squirrel *couldn’t* pray, but this one had prayed, because wasn’t praying the same as wanting to live? And it was all his, Thomas’s, fault. How low. (…)

Yes, low. To miss those able to protect themselves through skill and grace and hit only the vulnerable, the unsuspecting… That squirrel hadn’t even seen him, it had not had any warning. (…) it was not a consolation.