THE NOBEL LECTURE

I

My presence here, on this tribune, should be an argument for all those who praise life's God-given, marvelously complex unpredictability. In my school years I used to read volumes of a series then published in Poland—"The Library of the Nobel Laureates." I remember the shape of the letters and the color of the paper. I imagined then that Nobel laureates were writers, namely persons who write thick works in prose, and even when I learned that there were also poets among them, for a long time I could not get rid of that notion. And certainly, when, in 1930, I published my first poems in our university review, *Alma Mater Vilnensis*, I did not aspire to the title of writer. Also, much later, by choosing solitude and giving myself to a strange occupation—that is, to writing poems in Polish, while living in France or America—I tried to maintain a certain ideal image of a poet who, if he wants fame, wants to be famous only in the village or the town of his birth.

One of the Nobel laureates whom I read in childhood influenced to a large extent, I believe, my notions of poetry. That was Selma Lagerlöf. Her *Wonderful Adventures of Nils*, a book I loved, places the hero in a double role. He is the one who flies above the earth and looks at it *from above* but at the same time sees it in every detail. This double vision may be a metaphor of the poet's vocation. I found a similar metaphor in a Latin ode of a seventeenth-century poet, Maciej Sarbiewski, who was once known all over Europe under the pen name of Casimire. He taught poetics at my university. In that ode he describes his voyage—on the back of Pegasus—from Wilno to Antwerp, where he is going to visit his poet friends. Like Nils Holgersson, he beholds under him rivers, lakes, forests; that is, a map, both distant and yet concrete. Hence, two attributes of the poet: avidity of the eye and the desire to describe that which he sees.