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Czesław Miłosz

Michel Maslowski

Only the blind can fail to see the irony of the situation that the human species brought upon itself when it tried to master its own fate and to eliminate error. It bent its knee to History; and History is a cruel god. Today, the commandments that fall from his lips are uttered by a clever chaplain hiding in his empty interior. The eyes of the god are so constructed that they see wherever a man can go; there is no shelter from them.¹

My childhood was marked by two sets of events whose significance I see as more than social or political. One was the revolution in Russia, with of all its various consequences. The other was the omen of Americanisation Now there is no doubt that Americanisation has carried off complete victory: Americanisation means the product of forces not only lower than man and not only outstripping him, submerging him, but, what is more important, sensed by man as both lower than and outstripping his will.²

In fact, only the individual is real, not the mass movements in which he voluntarily loses himself in order to escape himself. ... Here, now, I am only asking myself what I have learned in America, and what I value in that experience. I can boil it all down to three sets of pros and cons: for the so-called average man, against the arrogance of intellectuals; for the Biblical tradition, against the search for individual or collective nirvana; for science and technology, against dreams of primeval innocence.³

That truth is a proof of freedom and that the sign of slavery is the lie. ... That objective truth exists⁴

Czesław Miłosz was a poet and essayist, not a political writer or a philosopher. However, he was also a sage, whose poems and essays played an important role

both in politics and philosophy. It is nevertheless difficult to classify him. Born in central Lithuania, the territory of which belonged to Poland during the interwar period, he regarded himself as an heir of the vast, multi-ethnic and multi-faith Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which had been united with the Kingdom of Poland for four centuries and whose elites had been subject to Polonization. He was also an heir of the Polish independence tradition, close to the liberalism of the nineteenth century, but an opponent of Polish nationalism, and often identified himself with the Left.

From the very beginning, his poetry was characterized by a premonition of cataclysms ('catastrophism') and the importance Miłosz attached to the dignity of the 'ordinary man'. After the Second World War, he started working for the communist government, and worked for two years as the press attaché at the embassy in Washington. In the face of the Stalinization of Poland, while in Paris in 1951 he 'chose freedom' and decided to go into exile. At that time, he started writing for a Polish-émigré magazine, *Kultura*, which worked towards overcoming hatred and promoting cooperation between the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth nations, that is, Ukraine, Lithuania and Belarus. In Paris, he cooperated with the anti-totalitarian Congress for Cultural Freedom and with *Preuves* magazine. In 1953, he published *The Captive Mind*. The book, which was met with a hostile reception from the French Left, eventually became a worldwide success and remains an academic course book today. As Miłosz stated in the book, he wrote it so that 'eternal slaves might speak through my lips'.⁵

In the essay, Miłosz compared the response to ideological pressure of Eastern European intellectuals and common people with *ketman* – an old Persian technique of concealing one's true feelings. Thanks to *ketman*, it is possible to affirm the meaning of a life of honest work and personal integrity in the face of being forced to participate in cruel decisions or practices one disagrees with. In the Soviet Empire, as in old Persia, this method allowed staying true to oneself despite having to submit to the situation. As Miłosz described it, the Soviet system was one that, through the guise of democratic procedures such as elections (counterfeited) or medical aid (KGB agents disguised as nurses), made people identify themselves with the roles imposed on them to such an extent that even married couples would recite the slogan of the day in bed.

The Captive Mind unveiled the illusions of the 'New Faith' or 'diamat' (dialectical materialism, the Marxist orthodoxy), comparing its effects to those of a drug which deprives people of the will to criticize and to break free. From a sociological perspective, the Soviet system, which was supposed to lead to universal brotherhood, was responsible, in fact, for promoting the success of

opportunists and to a war of all against all. In terms of anthropology, Miłosz understood the New Faith as a project of reducing the belief in individual freedom and fate, which was a cornerstone of European culture, to a class history and, therefore, to a collective history. It was an effort to resolve the dualism he diagnosed within human beings which allows us to live our own individual lives and our social roles simultaneously, and the tensions and struggles that result from that. To resolve these tensions, the New Faith reduces man to his affiliations, making him a 'social monkey'. Man is thus deprived of all his creativity, not only because of censorship and ideological pressure but also because creation requires complete solitude.

Miłosz's liberalism may be summarized as his opposition to the New Faith in defence of what he considered core values of European culture and humanity. In the face of the alluring Marxist illusion, Miłosz reminds us of the fundamental values of humanity: freedom in creativity, related to solitude and inner autonomy; a need for hope, which he thought could only come through eschatological or religious perspectives; the faith that a human being cannot be reduced to any kind of social doctrine; a faith in family as 'normalcy', and as the basis of every culture; and the value of cultural affiliation, which provides identity as well as the necessity of 'nationalistic' affirmation – however, without hubris or collective egoism.

In *The Captive Mind*, as well as in many of his poems, Miłosz emphasizes the importance of human dignity, regardless of social status, and in the undertone he establishes an alliance between workers and intellectuals. This is why he was later considered the spiritual father of 'Solidarność' ('Solidarity'), Poland's first independent trade union in the years 1980–1, whose activity precipitated the overturning of communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. An excerpt from his poem 'You Who Wronged a Simple Man',⁶ selected by the workers themselves, was inscribed on the memorial to the victims of the police strike repressions of 1970. Miłosz's receiving the Nobel Prize in the year 1981, alongside the election of a Polish pope, further strengthened the self-esteem and the sense of dignity of the Polish people. As a result, a society enslaved by an imposed communist system started to regain its identity. A few years later this process resulted in the collapse of the Soviet bloc.

In 1960 Miłosz was appointed professor at Berkeley, where in 1968 revolutionary events took place as part of the anti-Vietnam War and Civil Rights movements and the rise of the American counterculture. Berkeley served Miłosz as a vantage point from which he could observe what he considered the mental transformation and crisis of Western civilization, to which he testifies in numerous poems and essays. In 1969 he published a book-length summary of

his observations, entitled *Visions from San Francisco Bay*, from which the second and third passages in the opening extract are taken. According to Miłosz, the crisis started together with European ‘nausea’ (*nausée*): ‘The European spirit hated itself, turned against itself, and derided the institutions it had elaborated, perhaps thus masking a painful sense of its own disgrace.’⁷ This crisis of self-disgust was exported to the United States, mostly through the theatre of the absurd, taught in schools, as well as through novels and popular theories.

According to Miłosz, in Berkeley the ‘American way of life’ is distorted. ‘New America’ is dominated by a hatred for virtues, which is represented by badly shaved beards and marijuana, a substitute for the alcohol used by the defenders of the system.

To negate virtue, one must oppose industry with idleness, puritanical repression of urges with instant gratification, tomorrow with today, alcohol with marijuana, moderation in the display of emotion with shameless emotionality, the isolation of the individual with the collective, calculation with carelessness, sobriety with ecstasy, racism with the blending of the races, obedience with political rebellion, stiff dignity with poetry, music and dance The place of honor is given to primitive man⁸

The effect was to strengthen the feeling of alienation associated with the mechanization of life, the number of highways and TV reports featuring all the violence in the world. It gave rise to dreams of living on the Fortunate Islands, of free sex (which is anti-erotic itself) and to a deficit of desire, which leads to feelings of boredom within a space with no particular orientation; hence the search for consolation in drugs. As Miłosz had earlier compared the effects of the communist ‘New Faith’ to a drug providing a feeling of happiness and cheerfulness, which makes all problems insignificant and allows the individual to accept new rulers without objection, so he now compared the American transformation to the effects of LSD. He perceived the revolt of beatniks and hippies as pointless and destructive.

As Miłosz predicted, the communist revolution finally failed, and Americanization succeeded on a world scale. An individual life follows a circular pattern now, devoid of any sense of meaning. Inherited from the Bible, life as the movement of an arrow headed towards its target (or towards a promise of a target, a belief in a destination) has been fundamental to Western civilization from its dawn. Inherited from Christianity, this tradition later took the secular form of a belief in progress – either technical, moral or social. By contrast, Miłosz compared contemporary civilization to a vast landfill site, where young people are being

‘trained in nihilism’ at school. In his writings, he stood up against any ideology which would require the individual to surrender to the collectivity and which would allow the intellectuals to decide how to save the world, not taking into account the experience of common, ordinary people. Miłosz also rearticulated the value of morality and the virtues: in science, technology and effort.

Although Miłosz criticized the institution of the church, with its sacralization – especially in Poland – of national deities, it is the crisis of religion or the sense of meaning which worried him most, because it leads straight to nihilism, the crisis of humanity.⁹ It was nihilism that gave rise to Marxism-Communism, as well as the consumerism of Americanization and the crisis of religious faith. Without a sense of meaning, there can be no freedom, creativity or dignity. According to Miłosz, the religious crisis is related to a collapse of spatial imagination, and as a poet he tried to address this issue. Religious – or rather anthropological and metaphysical – themes dominated the last period of his work.

This period can be considered an attempt to construct an anthropocentric space. The poet situates himself on the edge, between his political sympathies for the Left and faith, which he tries to express using nontraditional language. He professed a degree of anti-clericalism rooted in his youth, which he spent in the very Catholic and nationalistic city of Vilnius. Fascinated by metaphysics and rejecting dogmatism, he was impressed by the intellectual solidity of the edifice of theology, especially of Thomism. Over time he began to perceive religion mostly as a poet and an unprofessed mystic. He admired the nineteenth-century Polish Catholic and nationalist poet Adam Mickiewicz, a friend of Lamennais, the founder of Liberal Catholicism in France, and the group related to *l’Avenir*, Lamennais’ newspaper, which fought for the freedom of teaching, separation of church and state and freedom of conscience. The journal, as well as liberalism itself, was condemned by the Vatican, but this model of linking democratic beliefs with faith survived in Polish memory. The quest for freedom from dogmas which might appeal to modern man inspired Miłosz to read esoteric literature (e.g. Origen, Böhme, Swedenborg, Blake, Solovyov, his uncle the Lithuanian poet Oscar Miłosz, Simone Weil). Later, Miłosz was also to become a correspondent of the poet and Trappist monk, Thomas Merton.

Miłosz wrote a series of essays and poems on religion. Pope John Paul II himself would later reply to *Tract* by Miłosz by publishing his own poem, *Roman Triptych* (2003), which touched on some of the questions posed by the Nobel Prize winner. Among the topics raised by Miłosz are the presence of evil in the world, inconsistencies between the dogmas of the cultural imaginarium which dates back to the Middle Ages and the knowledge of modern man, and what can

be called an ontological crisis of civilization (a lack of meaning and a lack of a sense of reality). History, the new god of the twentieth century, turns out to be nothing but a cannibalistic idol. Nevertheless, the presence of God, apart from all speculation, can be noticed within the 'interhuman space' and the 'interhuman church' – which explains the need for rituals: 'A ritual constructs a sacral space among those present in It.'¹⁰ The poet, who highlights the irreducible value of the individual at every opportunity ('faith as the secret of individual freedom and individual destiny'¹¹), nevertheless acknowledges the need – or even the necessity – for the existence of an institutional church.

Miłosz's ultimate concern is the reconstruction of a modern spatial imaginarium. He regards it as a task he needs to fulfil: 'There have always been a multitude of preachers calling for inner rebirth, a rebirth of the heart, and ... this has been no help against cruelty and injustice. ... I am not, however, in the least counting on some effort of the will, but rather on something independent of the will – data which would order our spatial imagination anew.'¹² Today, he claimed, 'faith is undermined by disbelief in faith, and disbelief by disbelief in itself'.¹³ This is how he approached the problem of the ontological crisis of modern man, related to nihilism and the lack of desire, and finally the disappearance of the sense of a meaning of life in the modern West. This was apparent in Berkeley in 1968, during processions carrying a gigantic phallus, when nudity was not shocking for anyone. This crisis was noticeable even right after the Second World War, in the feeling of emptiness present among intellectuals, an emptiness that they attempted to fill with the rituals of the New Faith. It is not enough to become a part of the masses or crowds. Only what remains with the individual in the face of death possesses any value. A disinherited man, who consumes with no thought of constraint, both literally and metaphorically, turns natural and divine space into a vast landfill site without any meaning at all. It is necessary to recommence working on meaning – the way the task of bereavement is done – and remind a man of his own dignity.

Throughout his life, Miłosz resisted the ideological tendencies dominating his environment. In Catholic, conservative Vilnius he rejected all signs of nationalism, anti-Semitism, national and religious ritualism, therefore siding with the Left. Later, having finished his diplomatic service and broken with the communist authorities, in *The Captive Mind* and *Native Realm* he described the system as one which was supposed to make the people happy, but neglected the individual, with his need for spirituality, freedom and creativity. As he stated in his *Six Lectures in Verse*, 'The true enemy of man is generalization.'¹⁴ At the

same time, the manipulation of reason was offensive to common sense and could in no way provide a response to the inner void of modern man.

Miłosz fought against communism as an ideology which, through physical enslavement and intellectual seduction (a kind of drug which relieved the individual of the option of creatively looking for meaning), deprived human beings of free choice. His further rejection of American consumerism, the rejection of the worship of work and discipline, the virtues upon which the creation of America was based, resulted in his identifying 'Americanization' as an ideology of global scope, a new drug compelling and seducing with the 'authenticity' of liberated instincts. Miłosz's refusal to yield to the Western society of prosperity was, in a sense, his way of disagreeing with the passivity and futility of American and French intellectuals, especially those representing the Parisian Left Bank, who – in the name of 'progress' and the dream of a better tomorrow – neglected man and his need for dignity, a meaningful life and hope. Those needs have to be fulfilled in the metaphysical sense, regardless of particular religions. Miłosz regarded himself as Catholic – but in a very specific sense.

Let us attempt to summarize this Copernican revolution of the imaginarium in the modern world, threatened by the catastrophe of nonsense, as declared by Miłosz. The key to Miłosz's new imaginarium could be the picture he remembered from the war years, when, at the railway station in Kiev, overflowing with crowds of refugees and soldiers, he noticed a family sitting in the corner, calmly feeding their children:

A peasant family – husband and wife and two children – had settled down by the wall... The wife was feeding the younger child; the husband ... was pouring tea out of a kettle into a cup for the older boy. They were whispering to each other in Polish. I gazed at them until I felt moved to the point of tears. ... This was a human group, an island in crowd that lacked something proper to humble, ordinary human life ... their isolation, their privacy in the midst of the crowd – that is what moved me.¹⁵

Human relationships liberated from the hell of war, from individual misfortunes, created a space for freedom. Similarly, a search for new images of space might renew the feeling of meaning and the possibility of faith. The new imaginarium consists in a transformation of vertical space, frozen in place for eternity, into an interrelational, dynamic, horizontal space, and in the evocation of a transcendental plane, most apparent from an eschatological perspective. In fact, the fulfilment of God's promise is always before us, and its final fulfilment is the

end of time. Faith constitutes the mystery of freedom and individual vocation. And if clear thought and a vehement will are essential, we cannot forget about desire, which brings about thought, and about the emotions rooted in archetypes and existential experience that revive ancient symbols, without which the human being would not have been able to leave the kingdom of animals.

Miłosz's overcoming of his own solipsism and individualism from a liberal perspective took place as part of this evolution, too. Miłosz understood this during his visit to the Dordogne region of France, from which *Homo sapiens* had gone out and spread throughout the whole of Europe and the world.

The country of the Dordogne is ... a prenatal landscape so hospitable that prehistoric man, twenty or thirty thousand years ago, selected the valley of the Vézère for his abode. ... Gradually ... I stopped worrying about the whole mythology of exile ... I was like an ancient Greek. I had simply moved from one city to another. My native Europe ... dwelled inside me.¹⁶