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BETWEEN A COLONY AND AN EMPIRE. MIŁOSZ AND DOSTOYEVSKY

In the concluding sentences of *The Captive Mind*, published in Paris two years after his decision to remain there, Czesław Miłosz sets his poetic "gift of seeing simultaneously" against the optics of the Soviet Center (Miłosz 1981: 251). The unifying perspective of the Empire (*Union soviétique*), in which all differences are eliminated, collapses here with the acknowledgement of the incessant presence of particular nations, which had been consigned by History to dissolve in "the Russian sea". Crimean Tatars, Ukrainians, Balts, Poles, Czechs – this is but the beginning of a long list of "endangered species", whose side Miłosz takes, as if against the merciless logic of the Darwinian concept of natural selection. "Seeing simultaneously what is happening in Omaha and Prague, in the Baltic states and on the shores of the Arctic Ocean" (Miłosz 1981: 251), becomes here a synonym for the equal value of observed events. This ability allows the poet to restore the meaning and value of the "peripheries", which had been condemned to oblivion, as well as to escape from the paralyzing charm of "historical necessity".

The evil shadow of the Euro-Asian colossus ceaselessly follows Miłosz not only in what used to be the "capital of the world" on the Seine, but also in his later American refuge, where he was cordoned off from Soviet despotism by two oceans. Half a century later, he would write about the French that "our misfortunes did not weigh on

them", "they didn't want to understand anything and only complained that they were liberated by Americans, not by the most progressive nation of the world" (Miłosz 2011: 129, 130). What is more, their *désintéressement* extended also to the literature of occupied nations between Germany and Russia, which is perhaps why, during the whole decade which he spent in Western Europe, Miłosz did not have "even a single offer from any institution concerned with propagating knowledge" (Miłosz 1982: 200). When in America, Miłosz was met with a seemingly opposite tendency, as the Cold War was conducive to the development of Slavic Studies departments at universities, thought to be centers of Sovietology studies (cf. Cavanagh 2010: 6). Hired as a Polish literature instructor at the University of California, he quickly understood that there, just like in the Old Continent, the dominant perspective was Russocentric, which in practice entailed the marginalization of Central European literature. Based on years of obse-rvation, Miłosz claims that:

> Students of Slavic languages and literature […] are not […] prepared to think about the area, whose events appear chaotic at best. They write their dissertations about Tyutchev or Goncharov and the presence of a tangible text reaffirms their conviction that only Russia is real (Miłosz 2010: 89).

In this way institutions called to "spread knowledge about the encroaching red disease" (Cavanagh 2010: 6), turned instead to "spreading praise" of Russian writers (Miłosz 2010: 90). Accompanying this kind of idolatry, which marginalizes "smaller literature" – and does so "against the clarion call issued on campuses for the equality of all cultures" – is, according to Miłosz, an element of "feedback" harkening back to a vision from the beginning of the nineteenth century of two world powers invested with a planetary calling, from America and Russia (Miłosz 2010: 90). In our search for the historical roots of this state of affairs, we cannot disregard the process of "orientalization" affecting Central Europe, which was initiated in the eighteenth century and carried out within the limits of the Enlightenment *episteme*. Enlightenment thinkers almost simultaneously constructed two "Orients": far, African-Asian, unmasked by Edward W. Said in his famous *Orientalism* in 1978, and near, European, which still constitutes, to use Cavanagh's phrase, "a white blemish on the map of contemporary theory" (cf. Cavanagh 2003: 60; Skórczewski 96–97).

In his defense of the identity and subjectivity of "small nations", Miłosz took into account the "political" as well as the "rhetorical"

aspect of their loss of freedom. The University of Michigan in Ann Arbor organized a conference in January of 1986 devoted to Central European culture with the aim of counteracting the "Yaltan program of American universities" (cf. Miłosz 2011: 416). At this conference, Miłosz denounced what he considered the "Easternization by force" of countries separated from the West by the "iron curtain", a tendency manifested in, for example, these countries being doggedly described as Eastern European. "The hygienic reason to select the term Central Europe, he argued, is that it allows the search for the specific aspect of that culture and it protects us from erroneous analogies", which are essentially based on reducing *ad Orientem*, or *ad Occidentem* (Miłosz 2011: 126–127). In the same presentation, Miłosz called the postwar order "an insult to the intellect"

> In an era of anticolonialism, during the same time when the British and French Empires were collapsing, independent nations of half of Europe were subjected to external colonial despotism. The borders of the Empire and the garrisons of its army were incontrovertible; meanwhile, the mentality of the nations of masters appeared foreign to conquered populace, almost impossible to understand and barbaric. Russian self-admiration, or self-adoration, extends beyond the typical limits of haughtiness and bears the call of nineteenth-century messianism, which in that part of the world did not leave behind good memories (Miłosz 2011: 120).

Not only is the West unable to understand this mental difference but it is unable to even acknowledge it. This is why, when the West becomes interested in the Eastern European point of view, it looks for it in Russian literature. As a result, the voices of nations dependent on Russia are silenced and the odium of colonization is lifted. A Western reader often does not even realize that Russian literature is rarely "innocent", having developed under the shadow of the Russian Empire. Ewa M. Thompson convincingly argued this point in her book *Imperial Knowledge. Russian Literature and Colonialism*. This shadow can sometime extend quite far. Thompson, much like Miłosz earlier, points to the "tendencies to idealize the successes of Russian culture, which have appeared in tsarist times and which are visible in the Soviet period" as the dominant influence on Russian studies in America (Thompson 2000b: VI). Consequently, "the standards, conventions and expectations of English-language scholarship on Russian literature do not accommodate, as Thompson states, the aggressive search for self-assertion", present also (or perhaps most importantly) in the masterpieces of that literature (Thompson 2000a: 2). In those condi-

tions, the desired "decolonization" of Western perception of Central Europe would have to not only be based on giving voice to particular national literatures, co-creating the mosaic of that part of the continent, but also on displaying the imperial optics of the most preeminent Russian writers.

For Miłosz, as a scholar of Polish literature and culture, the opportunity to do so presented itself when he was invited by the University of Berkeley to conduct a course on Russian literature devoted to the works of Fyodor Dostoyevsky. "Had I been asked to conduct a course on Tolstoy, I would have said 'no'", admits Miłosz in a conversation with Aleksander Fiut, "but about Dostoyevsky I said: ok" (Fiut 125; cf. Miłosz 2010: 171). In deciding on what is now a traditional dilemma ("Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky") in favor of Dostoyevsky Miłosz was influenced not only by the particular stance taken by the respective writers on the Russian nation, but also by how the imperial character of this nation manifests itself in their respective works. Lew Tolstoy belongs – as is shown in the analysis of *War and Peace* in *Imperial Knowledge* – to a category of writers who have introduced the imperial perspective into their works without any special intentions, almost unwittingly, as if succumbing into the force of inertia (cf. Thompson 2000a: 85–108). However, lecturing on Dostoyevsky allowed Miłosz the opportunity to expose the imperial character of Russian literature on the example of the writer, whose main, if not only, impulse for writing was his "affair with Russia", understood as an apotheosis of her civilizational mission, a sacralization of her imperialistic passion (cf. Miłosz 2010: 139, 165).

This image of Dostoyevsky was not very well known in the West. It was associated mainly with his journalistic activity, the significance of which was downplayed in relation to his whole work. And this is precisely what incited Miłosz's opposition. Miłosz contrasts the approach to Dostoyevsky which sees him "exclusively as a genius of psychological intuition" (Miłosz 2010: 83), which was a pervasive approach, especially in America, with his own "historical approach" (Miłosz 2010: 110), which moved towards "establishing the connection between Dostoyevsky's journalism and his novels: in what mysterious way this 'transmutes' to great literature" (Miłosz 2010: 174)[1].

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[1] Though he was quite critical of Western studies on Dostoyevsky, Miłosz saw an exception to this rule in Joseph Frank, a professor at Standford University, the author of

According to Miłosz, it was important to "abandon the established opinion that genius resided in Dostoyevsky **despite** his reactionary views" and accept the fact that he was "a great writer, because he was something of a clairvoyant, and that he **owes** this gift to his reactionism" (Miłosz 2010: 149; emphasis mine). The primary task therefore was to break the tendency to separate Dostoyevsky the writer with Dostoyevsky the ideologue (Miłosz 2010: 102) by putting in parentheses "the philosophical and political orientation of Dostoyevsky, expressed in his journalism, journals and letters" (Miłosz 2010: 164). The aim of shifting the center of attention from the "psychological depth" of his characters to "reactionary views" of the author was in this case to regain the necessary balance (cf. Miłosz 2010: 91, 141–142), not yet another reduction of his work, this time to "the political dimension" (Miłosz 2010: 176).

What attracted Miłosz to Dostoyevsky was that he was a writer of literature that was not "excessively literary", a characteristic which, according to Miłosz, "stems from the weight of the philosophy informing a given writer, that is the fervor with which he or she refers to final matters, which causes great tension between thought and work" (Miłosz 2010: 92).

> I believe that the secret of Dostoyevsky is connected, paradoxically, with his political interests, which can be seen in his *A Writer's Diary*, with his great anxiety and fear concerning the future of Russia. […] It is precisely from this rage, passion or anxiety that is the source of his inventiveness concerning this writing technique, which can be called a philosophical novel. (Miłosz 2010: 172)

The realism of this novel is based on the conviction that "history has a concealed metaphysical content" (Miłosz 2010: 158). "Dostoyevsky was mainly interested in history" said Miłosz in a conversation with Carl Proffer, but soon added that this was "a history of the Russian intelligentsia" (Miłosz 2010: 106). Miłosz viewed Dostoyevsky's entire work as a "conscious consolidation and commentary on the changes in Russian thought" (Miłosz 2010: 84), which had a particular tendency to go astray. Miłosz cites Nikolai Berdyaev, who notices that Dostoyevsky's main achievement was that he "perfectly exposed the **ontological** consequences of false ideas" (Miłosz 2010: 149). If then,

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a multivolume study of Dostoyevsky, which, according to Miłosz, was an "unrivaled achievement of American Dostoyevsky scholarship" (Miłosz 2010: 86, 167).

according to Miłosz, Dostoyevsky's philosophy does not deserve to be ignored, it is precisely why it constitutes "a serious attempt at assessing the spiritual situation of man in the midst of diminishing religious faith and the advancements of the scientific worldview" (Miłosz 2010: 168), bringing an apt diagnosis of what he readily called "the erosion of religious imagination" (Miłosz 2010: 176). Despite the clear similarities in views shared by both writers towards the deepening spiritual disinheritance and the mental dependencies of the educated masses on communism, which was genocidal in its consequences, Miłosz did not surrender to the temptation to project onto Dostoyevsky his own views and interests, as has been done many times before and after him. Also, in practice he was successful in remaining true to his intentions of providing a multifaceted and comprehensive survey of Dostoyevsky's work, without excluding any of its aspects.

A good example of this objectivity is Miłosz's attitude towards Mikhail Bakhtin's hypothesis about the polyphonic character of Dostoyevsky's novels. Miłosz regarded Bakhtin with upmost respect and considered him as one of the representatives of "the old intelligentsia cultivating esoteric knowledge about his favorite writer" (Miłosz 2010: 162). In accordance with Aleksander Woźny's assessment, Bakhtin's work stems from the tradition of "Russian renaissance" from the turn of the century; this work is particularly tied to this movement, represented by Pavel Florensky and Sergei Bulgakov (Woźny 50–51). Bulgakov, along with Berdyaev, whom Miłosz often cited, belonged to a group of philosophers, who, in response to the revolution of 1905 and 1917, published two famous collections of articles, appropriately titled *Vekhi* ("about the Russian intelligentsia") and *Iz glubiny* ("about the Russian revolution"). According to Miłosz, "in the long history of reading Dostoyevsky in various countries, the highest place, in terms of understanding his intentions, should be accorded to the authors of these two books" (Miłosz 2010: 142), and its critique of intelligentsia "remains absolutely valid" even today (Miłosz 2010: 169). Miłosz also regards Bakhtin's work about the poetics of Dostoyevsky as "exceptional", fully worthy of the interest it has been received (Miłosz 2010: 162–163). This does not, however, mean that he refrains from expressing his skepticism with resect to the factual scope of polyphony in Dostoyevsky's novels. "His polyphony has its limits. Behind it is an ardent believer, a Russian millennarist and messianist. It is difficult to think of anything more monophonic than the scene with Poles in

The Brothers Karamazov, a flat satire at odds with the seriousness of the novel" (Miłosz 2010: 101).

Wacław Lednicki also analyzed this scene in terms of political propaganda in *Russia, Poland and the West* (New York 1954), a book Miłosz often cited. The scene in question refers to the moment when Dmitri Karamazov, in the company of Polish exiles, raises a toast to Russia, with Wróblewski and Musiałowicz agreeing to drink under one condition – that the toast be "to Russia within her borders before 1772" (Dostoyevsky 1997: 424). The propaganda tactic utilized here, as Lednicki notices, is based on having people, who had earlier been portrayed as insolent, arrogant idiots and scoundrels, vocally support a just protest, thereby laying the protest open to ridicule. According to Lednicki, the Polish episode in *Brothers Karamazov*, the center of which is the conflict about the borders of Poland and partitions, was to constitute an echo of the discussions that took place between Dostoyevsky and his Polish fellow prisoners during their internment at a penal colony in Omsk (Lednicki 284–285)[2]. Miłosz rightly brings up this fragment of the novel as proof of the limits of Bakhtin's concept in its application to a concrete novel. The correct subject of the rhetorical and imperial violence towards Poles introduced in *Brothers Karamazov*, is not thus any "liberated character", entering "into relationships with other characters on the basis of their own logic, unforeseen by the author" (Miłosz 2010: 163), but the author himself, constructing Polish characters in such a way as to deprive them of any autonomy. Miłosz saw in the theory of polyphony, especially in its reception by American intellectualists, a useful tool for concealing the presence in the novel of that kind of double standards. He suspected in them, as he wrote, "the desire to separate the work of Dostoevsky from his own journalism and thus to rescue his novels from any political suspicion" (Miłosz 2010: 163–164).

It is in this context that the significance of Miłosz's comment to the well-known letter from Dostoyevsky to Natalia Fonvisin, written after he was released from the penal colony at the beginning of 1854, be-

[2] This hypothesis was later developed by Zbigniew Żakiewicz, who claimed that "Dostoyevsky not only wanted to mock Polish hopes of reclaiming independence for the land lost as a result of the 1772 partition, but also humiliate his Polish fellow prisoners", Szymon Tokarzewski and Józef Bogusławski, as the two Poles from *The Brothers Karamazov* "appear to be caricatures of the inseparable couple of Polish political exiles", known earlier from *The House of the Dead* (Żakiewicz 86).

comes most evident. Miłosz brings the image of Christ to the fore, an image that Dostoyevsky created for his own use, "putting together, as he confided to his addressee – a symbol of faith" (Miłosz 2010: 127)[3]. And it is this problem that takes us back to the key concept developed by Bakhtin, that is to the place where he recalls the following auto-commentary made by Dostoyevsky to the so-called legend of the Great Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov*: "I have a moral model and an ideal, Christ. I ask: would he have burned heretics? – no. That means the burning of heretics is an immoral act…" (Bakhtin 97). According to Bakhtin, in the quoted passage "it is extremely characteristic of Dostoevsky that a question is put to the ideal image (how would Christ have acted?), that is, there is an internal dialogic orientation with regard to it, not a fusion with it but a following of it" (Bakhtin 98). The essence of polyphony in novels, according to Bakhtin, is the goal towards which all the multiple, parallel, and autonomous voices are directed.

> The image of the ideal human being or the image of Christ represents for him [Dostoyevsky] the resolution of ideological quests. This image or this highest voice must crown the world of voices, must organize and subdue it. Precisely the image of a human being and his voice, **a voice not the author's own**, was the ultimate artistic criterion for Dostoyevsky: not fidelity to his own convictions and not fidelity to convictions themselves taken abstractly, but precisely a fidelity to the authoritative image of a human being. (Bakhtin 97; emphasis mine)

And thus, the problem in maintaining the polyphonic aspect of his novel results, as opposed to Miłosz's contention, not from the mere presence of "moralistic, Christian intentions of the author" (Miłosz 2010: 163), but from the extent to which these intentions are authentically Christian ("gift given freely") and the extent to which they belong to the writer. It is therefore a matter of the veracity of the aforementioned "Christ's image". On the basis of Bakhtin's theory, its verification does not generate any greater difficulties. It is enough to refer "the ultimate artistic criterion" to the aforementioned "scene with the Poles" and ask: would Christ have supported the imperial expansion of Russia? Dostoyevsky did not decide on a confrontation with such a formulated question among any of his Christ-like characters. However, the writer's work, when treated as a coherent totality,

[3] Miłosz cites here a larger fragment of Dostoyevsky letter, probably in his own translation.

which apart from his great novels also include "his journalism, journals and letters" (Miłosz 2010: 164), indicates ambiguously that the answer to this question would be affirmative. Miłosz arrives at an analogical conclusion on the basis of Dostoyevsky's letter to Mme. N. D. Fonvisin. "If anyone could prove to me, Dostoyevsky wrote, that Christ is outside the truth, and if the truth **really** did exclude Christ, I should prefer to stay with Christ and not with truth" (qtd. in Miłosz 2010: 128). According to Miłosz, by contrasting Christ with truth, Dostoyevsky was embarking on a dangerous path leading straight to "a false Christ, that is someone who we imagine", and thus "an idol in our likeness" in particular thus "to Christ brought to us 'on the tips of bayonets'", "an Imperial Christ" (Miłosz 2010: 103, 176–177).

> For Dostoyevsky, Russia as a nation does not signify only a territory inhabited by Russians. Russia was to be responsible for the future of the world: whether it would become infected with atheist and socialist ideas arriving from the West, just as its intelligentsia had already been infected, or will the Tsardom and the devout Russian populace manage to rescue Russia, called forth to rescue mankind (Miłosz 2010: 142).

In what way did Dostoyevsky believe Russia was to rescue Europe? "Bringing her, as Miłosz reiterates, 'a Russian Christ' on the tips of bayonets" (Miłosz 2010: 155). Miłosz considered Dostoyevsky's faith "in Christianity" as a "projection of his faith in Russia" (Miłosz 2010: 180).

This particular perspective exposed Miłosz to misunderstandings with his French and American friends, who directly accused him of nationalism (Miłosz 2002: 146). It should be noted that this type of accusation is not unusual coming from people with an imperialist mentality. As Thompson, following Leela Gandhi, notices:

> The antinationalist phobias of first-world thinkers and their readiness to attribute chauvinism to the assertions of nationhood by stateless or empire-dominated nations are echoes of a Hegelian perception of a "lack" characterizing all but the strongest nationalisms of Europe. […] The colonial and imperial nations characteristically *universalize* themselves and declare any insurgency against them (such as nationalism) illegitimate […]. In doing so, they invoke their own modern societal structures, while suggesting that the insurgency is rural, backward, or uncivilized. Under such circumstances, rhetorical appropriation of a militarily weak enemy is an easy feat. […] the "paranoid antipathy" toward nationalism is a form of retreat to the set of attitudes and ways of knowing that generated, among others, Orientalism. (Thompson 2000a: 11; cf. Gandhi 102–121).

The "postcolonial perspective" would also explain why Miłosz so often returns to "the question of Dostoevsky's roots, which are supposedly to be found in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania". According to Cavanagh, this trope provides Miłosz with a source of "another 'perverted pleasure' derived from returning the Russian author, against his will, to an idealized Lithuania", as an answer "to the incessant Russocentric Dostoyevskian universe" (Cavanagh 2010: 16). We would, therefore, be dealing with a kind of "rhetorical revenge" exacted by Miłosz for having been born in Lithuania, i.e. in Russia, if one adopts Dostoyevsky's perspective, as a "subject to the Russian Empire" (Miłosz 2010: 42; Miłosz 2002: 16). As Galina Starovoitova notes, "Russian national identity is closely related to territoriality; all conquered land is soon redesignated as Russia" (qtd. in Thompson 2000a: 8). This is fully in line with accounts of Dostoyevsky's Polish companions from the penal colony in Omsk.

> Dostoyevsky – one of them wrote – never said that Ukraine, Volhynia, Podolia, Lithuania and all of Poland are countries conquered by force; he always maintained that they have always belonged to Russia and that the hand of God's justice had returned to the Tsar everything so that the populace would be enlightened by the paternal and divine rule of the Tsar. 'Otherwise, as Dostoyevsky states, left to their own devices, these countries would fall into poverty, ignorance and barbarity' (Bogusławski; cf. Tokarzewski 156).

Miłosz was always accompanied by the bitter awareness that Russia of Dostoyevsky "could have become what she was only by liquidating the Polish-Lithuanian *Respublica*" (Miłosz 2002: 129). At least one sentence in *The House of the Dead*, in which Dostoyevsky explains why Poles had it "much worse" in Siberia than Russians, speaks to this Russian writer's credit. "They were far from their own country", he wrote at the beginning of the chapter "Comrades" (Dostoevsky 1948: 249). What could he have had in mind, since all of the prisoners were far from their homes and relatives, regardless of whether they were brought to Omsk from Petersburg or Vilnius or Warsaw? Were they not inhabitants of "one Russia", in which every corner, even the most distant and hostile, should feel like home? By giving Poles the right to feel nostalgia for their own country, did he not prove that he, if only for a moment, was privy to the perspective of a conquered nation?

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