

## WAT – RUSSIA – MIŁOSZ

I will begin with an attempt to clarify the subject at the heart of the dialogue between Wat and Miłosz – Russia. Writing about Russia, Nikolai Berdyaev emphasizes that the history of Russia is characterized by discontinuity and five distinct epochs can be distinguished. These are: Kievan Rus, the Rus from the age of Tatar rule, Muscovite Russia, the Russia of Peter I and Soviet Russia. He adds that it is also possible that there will be a new Russia (Berdyaev 1947).

Aleksander Wat's thoughts on the subject concentrate on Soviet Russia, which dominated his whole work and almost his whole adult life. History of literature presents Wat first as a futuristic poet, a leftist intellectual, an editor of the communist *The Literary Monthly*, and a frequent guest of banquets held by the USSR embassy in Warsaw; then, he is presented as a Soviet prisoner and exile, and finally as a man suffering from chronic pain, who saw his suffering as a punishment for having been actively involved in communism before the war (Wat 2003).

However, Miłosz, who treats Russia as an inextricable and obsessive part of every Pole's consciousness (Miłosz 1990: 134), accepted a much wider perspective. For him Soviet Russia is also important, not only because of the hope he saw in her when he was young, but also because of the life decisions he and those he was close to had to make. He writes about this in *Captive Mind* (Miłosz 1953). An important person, around whom the "Russian problem" revolves, is Fyodor Dostoyevsky, a writer who was also of interest to Wat. Both writers

approach Dostoyevsky not only as essayists. Wat translated *The Brothers Karamazov*, a book he often refers to in his own work, as well as to *Demons*. Miłosz, who does not like the “Western tendency to prepare Dostoyevsky in a Freudian sauce” (Miłosz 1978: 54), compiled university courses devoted to Dostoyevsky in an attempt to portray him not as a writer of psychological depth but as a writer who developed in a specific historical era, who had a sense of his own mission in life, as well as Russia’s mission in Europe. It is precisely the validity of this mission that will become the focal point of Miłosz’s dispute with Dostoyevsky.

What Dostoyevsky, Wat and Miłosz all share are experiences that compel them to stand not so much on the same side as on the side that is other than that of the Western world. Wat never forgot the mood of the decadence he experienced as he was lingering about the Berlin clubs near the end of the 1920s with Stefan Napierski (Mark Eiger) (Wat 2003). That image of Berlin convinced him that “it will come to fruition, if not today, then tomorrow or the day after: communism is at the door (Wat 2003).

From his stay in Paris in the 1930s, Miłosz brought back recollections of multilingual masses of workers wandering about in search of work” (Miłosz 1997: 191). Dostoyevsky viewed the Western world in even darker outlook. In his notes from journeys around Europe which he went on in 1862 he noted the images of crowds convening on the streets and public squares of London: “half a million workers, men and women, with their children [...] flocking to certain parts of the town, and all through the night, till five o’clock in the morning, they are taking part in a bacchanalian revel, eating and drinking like beasts, to last, one would think, the whole week” (Dostoyevsky 165). He was completely appalled by the image of streets crowded with prostitutes and paupers. Among them one could see teenage prostitutes and “mothers bringing their underage daughters for financial gain” (Dostoyevsky 166-167).

Despite similar observations, the three writers formulate different solutions. Wat believed that the only rescue for Europe plagued by decadence and inequality can only be a revolution paving the way to communism – that is what one gathers reading his work published in 1929-1931 in *The Literary Monthly* of which he was, as he admits, a “dictatorial” editor (Wat 2003). Dostoyevsky presented Orthodox Russia as a remedy to unemployment and mass poverty. Miłosz was

convinced that such social inequality should be leveled. In his novel, *The Seizure of Power* (1953), he presents History as a process which no one and nothing can stop. Włodzimierz Bolecki, explaining this as a Marxist worldview, emphasizes: “Historical events are from this perspective determined much like the rhythm of the changing seasons, daybreak and nightfall or the evolution of species. This is in relation, of course, to the so-called historical necessity” (Bolecki 61). Tomasz Burek refers to the “Hegelian bite” in regard to this (Burek).

As a young law student, Miłosz would regularly read the communist *The Literary Monthly*, though he had nothing in common with Marxism, and especially with communism. After some time, in *Man Amongst Scorpions*, he downplays the attention he devoted to the Soviet version of communism in his youth, explaining that his interest in this subject matter was a result of his reading of Stanisław Brzozowski’s social thought (Miłosz 2000: 5-6).

A certain kind of symbolism can be noticed in Miłosz’s and Wat’s relationship, something both writers sometimes called attention to. Born in 1900, Wat is a representative of the generation directly preceding Miłosz’s. Edited in 1929-1931, *The Literary Monthly* was read by the young student at the Vilnius University. He was particularly fond of the articles describing the difficult conditions of the Polish proletariat. Publication of *Monthly* ceased in 1931, the same year when the first edition of *Żagary* appeared, a magazine with which Miłosz was affiliated. In 1951 both writers together celebrate New Year’s Eve at Jan Parandowski. Miłosz in *A Year of the Hunter* recalls his trepidation at finding himself in the company of the Parandowskis and the Wats (Miłosz 1994). That is the last New Year’s Eve celebration Miłosz spent in his country before emigrating and one of the last that Wat survived free of the disease which later was to be the cause of his suicide. The year 1951 is also traditionally seen as a kind of caesura, after which both writers stopped publishing their work in their country (Pietrych 12). And, last but not least, *My Century*, which Miłosz listened to and recorded in Berkeley, is the first and last collaboration of both writers. In his earlier drafts for *Native Realm*, he emphasized that he comes from a family that put down roots in Lithuania. In the preface to *My Century* he builds a bridge between his “rootedness” in the world and the “rootedness” of Wat. That is why he recalls his ancestors so broadly and with such detail: rabbis, medieval scholars, famous kabbalists, and also participants of the January Uprising, clerics

from Vienna (Miłosz 1981). It is difficult not to notice that the type and scope of this information is far greater than common practice would indicate.

This excess only emphasizes a fact that is impossible to reduce: Aleksander Wat was Jewish. This has a huge significance in understanding the type of hope that Wat and other Polish Jewish communists saw in Russia (Shore), and also allows us to assess the extent of the disappointment they experienced.

Miłosz admits that when he was young, he knew very little about Jews, their culture, at least as far as the books published in Vilnius by Jewish authors are concerned. Yet he was able to decisively oppose the anti-Semitic sentiment (Miłosz 1994).

We could assume that the young Miłosz knew about the hope that many Jews cultivated for a political system whose essence was purported to be equality and justice for all people, regardless of their ethnic background or religion, that is, a political system where pogroms, ghetto benches, *numerus clausus*, *numerus nullus*, were to be unthinkable; just as unthinkable as Auschwitz was from the perspective of the 1930s.

To learn about Wat's attitude to Russia, we can read Leszek Kołakowski's essay entitled "Bóg czyli względność miłosierdzia", in which he addresses the question: is God good? The answer depends, claims Kołakowski, on who is asking the question. Is it Moses and his people, who were led out Egypt, or, for example, is it the pharaoh and his subjects, who lost everything that was firstborn, including their own children (Kołakowski 127). Simply put, the question about Wat's Russia is dependent on the position in which he finds himself at that moment. And the answer to that question could be imposed either by the deep faith in the justness of everything that is happening in Russia and because of Russia or by the feeling of deep injustice. For example: in the eleventh issue (1930) of *The Literary Monthly* there appeared a laudatory article about the cultural life in the USSR, detailing the immense popularity of literature and journalism among the so-called general population. This observation was illustrated by the following: "millions of reports sent to central, district, and factory newspapers [...] contributed to exposing many abuses and injustices" (Z.S. 499). In a lecture delivered in Oxford in 1962, Wat returns to the idea of mass literature, but describes it this time in a completely different perspective. He writes:

Weeks of recruitment are organized to attract workers to the ranks of the literati. During the International Congress in Kharkiv (1930) there is something to be proud of [...]: in three weeks one thousand workers were recruited. The majority of them are regional press correspondents, which is to say a variant of the secret police<sup>1</sup>.

Incidentally, writers in the USSR and in the Polish People's Republic were particularly adored. That being a postwar "engineer of souls" could yield many advantages is something Miłosz learned from a letter he received from Jerzy Andrzejewski, who was offered a villa by the government, a maid paid by the government along with a so-called "governess" for the children (Miłosz 2007: 60). Miłosz could not afford any of these luxuries following the war during his stay in America. He maintained contact with many friends from Poland and Europe. In these letters Miłosz addressed problems which stemmed from the type of relationship and the degree of intimacy connecting him to his addressees and often also touched on literature and issues related to publishing his work in Polish magazines. Miłosz rarely addressed the problems connected with the current political system in Poland and Russia, though his work, which would soon thereafter appear in Paris (*Captive Mind, The Seizure of Power, Native Realm*), provided ample evidence that he had much to say on that particular subject. For example, in a letter to Iwaszkiewicz from 1947, Miłosz sarcastically writes about the intellectual tendencies present in *Kuźnica*:

I read [...] *Kuźnica*. Żółkiewski's articles are widely known abroad and have certainly increased the citizen count in the States, France and the British dominion, as people usually choose the lesser evil, though here they're not condemned to the authority of this outstanding journalist. (Miłosz 2007: 167)

Of interest is his correspondence with Irena and Tadeusz Kroński, who were then residing in Paris and whom Miłosz later portrayed in an essay entitled "Tiger" (Miłosz 1990). The Krońskis did not hold back with their opinions. When they wrote to Miłosz that Polish intellectual life is governed by "hetman" – they were in fact referring to

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<sup>1</sup> This lecture served as the basis for the essay titled "A Few Comments on the Relation between Literature and Soviet Reality" ("Kilka uwag o związkach między literaturą a rzeczywistością sowiecką" [A few comments about the relation between and Soviet reality]) published in the volume *Świat na haku i pod kluczem*. Essays. Ed. K. Rutkowski. Warszawa, 1991. The cited fragment can be found on p. 160.

Stefan Żółkiewski; when they claimed that the Polish press is being ordered around by “kitties” (pl. “kotki”) – they had Jan Kott in mind; when they were complaining about the new oversight introduced in the Parisian embassy by Atramenta vel Janczar (Miłosz 2007, 267) – they had Jerzy Putrament in mind; when they wrote that Jewrejsz was on his way to Paris – they had Jerzy Borejsza in mind (Miłosz 2007: 344). They summed up the prevailing mood in the Polish embassy in the following words: “militant and ultranationalistic – Russians with eagles pinned to their yarmulkes” (Miłosz 2007: 349).

This verbal prodding by the Krońskis was meant to be a form of social criticism, not a discussion about worldviews. It is, however, difficult to ignore what today we would call politically incorrect jokes. Perhaps because the Kroński family was Jewish, they wanted to use such jokes to distance themselves from the activities of the Polish embassy in France or to underline their impression of the transient and carnivalesque mood of Paris. Though it is difficult to explain the sarcasm in these comments, it is impossible not to notice the inherent complex resulting from the combination of concepts connected with the Jewish community, communism, and Soviet Russia. It included the stereotypes of “communist-Jew”, or finally “Ubek-Jew”<sup>2</sup> (cf. Tazbir) as well as the hope many Jews invested in Soviet Russia and the revolution. The reasons why Soviet Russia, along with the vision of “a better new world” it offered, was attractive to Polish Jews is discussed by Joanna Nalewajko-Kulikow (Nalewajko-Kulikow 67-76). Alain Besançon explains the reason for this association, indicating that many Jews embraced communism, as it allowed them to freely exist in the modern world without the burden of strict religious limitations of the Torah. At the same time, they would be able to retain their religious affiliation as a matter of heritage rather than religious observance, as communism was thought to strive for the same goal as Judaism, i.e. peace and justice, further drawing a parallel between the Jews and the proletariat through a common experience of exploitation. (Besançon 2007). Julian Strykowski’s claim that “a communist Jew ceases to be a Jew” could be paraphrased in the following manner: a Jew never becomes a “real” communist, because he will always remain a Jew (Strykowski, Szewc 48). In 1923 Nikolai Berdyaev turned his attention to this issue arguing that Marx shifts the idea of Messianism, particular to the Jewish nation chosen by God, to the

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<sup>2</sup> Trans note: “Ubek” refers to officers of the Secret Political Police functioning in Poland during Stalinist era.

idea of social class, and especially to the proletariat. Similarly, as the chosen nation was Israel, now the new Israel is analogous to the working class (Berdyaev 1936). Shifting the idea of being 'chosen' from a nation to a social class was noticed and criticized in the 1930s. Criticism could be heard from journalists considering themselves Marxist as well as from writers associated with Yiddish literature. Jan Szymański (Jan Hempel) criticized Bruno Jasiński for portraying the events in *I Burn Paris* as having the same supernatural motivation as the deluge in the Bible, because for a communist writer the cause for all social change should be the Marxist class struggle (Szymański 33). Scholem Asch in his trilogy, which carries the suggestive title *Deluge*, made the following complaint through the mouthpiece of a character modeled after Cezary Baryka, who claimed that initially race included the members of a particular tribe, one nation, regardless of whether they were rich or poor and now this division runs through class lines, which is to mean that racial identity is related to class identity which now includes nationality and religious affiliation (Asch 1983). From among the communists who Wat valued most were the so-called "old communists", "old Bolsheviks", "real Bolsheviks". His work often compares them to apostles or medieval sage-ascetics. In their representations, he accentuates all the characteristics connected with the ethical and spiritual dimension.

That is perhaps why Aleksander Wat's work often evokes "the nostalgic myth of a Second Revolution redeeming the first, depraved revolution" (Wat 1991: 153).

Writing about Paris in 1946, where Jean-Paul Sartre was gaining more recognition and in his steady attempt to convert Miłosz to Marxism, Tadeusz Kroński remarks that to the participants of Parisian cultural life, he "is in the mood for a provocation of the type: 'If you're so cultured, why don't you read, for example, Thucydides!'" (Miłosz 2007: 289). Perhaps it was out of spite that Miłosz made translating *The History of the Peloponnesian War* professor Gil's main occupation, one of the characters of *The Seizure of Power*. There was also a more important reason: revealing the laws governing civilizations as universal and, at the same time, as ones which cannot be opposed, as they are inscribed in the nature of the world, society or civilization, even though their horror is experienced by an individual person.

Thucydides, translated by professor Gil, begins with the notion that the meaning of words has been changed in order to justify unworthy behavior. (Miłosz 1995). This resonates not only with

Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (which Irena Krońska was reading at that time before going to sleep), but also with Aleksander Wat's reflections regarding the language of Stalinist propaganda. Miłosz's approach was slightly different as, writes Andrzej Walicki, he "believed in the historical necessity of New Faith and was ready to serve her cause" (Walicki 190). Miłosz presents this problem in a similar manner:

For five years I have loyally served my country, trying, to the best of my understanding, to fulfill my obligations as a writer and as a cultural attaché in The United States and in France. I was delighted to see the semi-feudal structure of Poland finally smashed, the universities opened to young workers and peasants, agrarian reform undertaken and the country finally set on the road to industrialization [...]. I thus had reasons to hold on to the new Poland which was heading towards socialism [...]. (Miłosz 1983: 207-208)

However, at the last moment, when they wanted to "baptize" him, he left Poland.

Wat points to another universal principle governing the world. He notices that "merging humanistic, socialist and universal ideals – they are three different names for one ideal [...] the finish line, towards which humanity is striving from their most distant beginnings" (Wat 2001: 74). The problem is that their realization does not always come about in a previously assumed manner. In describing the nation of Amenhotep IV, Wat shows how quickly the most beautiful ideas turn to tyranny. For Miłosz as well as for Wat, tyranny, despotism and totalitarianism are in the end associated with Soviet Russia.

Despite this, Wat after returning to the USSR is an active participant in its cultural life and there were no indications that he had attempted to join the enormous number of Jews leaving the country (Grabski, Berndt), although he did think about emigrating just before the war because of a "thick" anti-Semitic atmosphere.

Wat's decision to remain in the country could be explained by his treatment of communism as a faith that justifies everything. Later, however, he was to lose that faith. Since achieving the maximum alternative proved unsuccessful, then, thought Wat, the minimum alternative will be successful. If the revolution and the Soviet version of communism failed to ensure equality and security for everyone, then after the nightmare of the war, this security should be ensured to at least every Jew. Wat had every right to make this assumption after having read the foundational acts of "new" Poland. The entry found



in the declaration of July 1944 in the PKWN manifesto (“The Jews, whom the occupant so bestially annihilated, will now be assured of the rebuilding of their existence and the equality of rights *de jure* and *de facto*” (*PKWN Manifesto*) and the declaration found in the Polish People’s Republic program, wherein the party “organizes mass work to fight with reactionism, fascism and its remnants – racial hatred, nationalism and anti-Semitism” could have reinforced his assumptions. I have the impression that after returning to Poland, Wat’s contributions to some of the most important newspapers are not only those of a writer or a journalist, but of a Jew. It is no coincidence that at the meeting of the Pen Club in 1948 in Copenhagen it was Wat who protested against sending greetings to Jewish writers from Palestine and Arabic writers at the same time. This was happening at about the same time when the nation of Israel was being proclaimed.

In Copenhagen, according to Tadeusz Bereza, Wat argued that:

Send to both of them? [...] In the meantime, the situation of either of them is not the same. There is something about Jewish Palestine, Israel that is able to speak to writer’s imagination in a special way. Consider, if you will, these thoughts: after 200 centuries to return to one’s nest, to the Promised Land, to the reclaimed land! There is something extremely poignant about this. And this is so regardless of the experiences Jews had to endure not too long ago, which makes it all the more poignant if you connect those two thoughts. (Wat 2008: 486)

In his articles we find the word “city” or “town” (*Sztetl*), which then appeared quite frequently in publications relating to the Extermination. When he took the stage to speak to an international audience, for example during the Pen Club meeting, Wat used the conceptual cluster “reclaimed/promised” land towards Poles who after millennia “reclaimed” their west lands, as well as to Jews who had been waiting for millennia for their nation (Wat 2008: 363). Sensitive to the themes which today we associate with the Extermination, he describes the murder and robbery committed by friends against their peers (Wat 2008: 416). He reads Iwaszkiewicz’s *Wzlot* as a work “about Jews” (Wat 2001: 69. 416).

However, when it turns out that Jewish community residing in Poland does not enjoy the same rights as the Poles, that the condition for advancing in the government structures requires assuming a Polish name, and comrade Wiesław is not sympathetic to Jews holding higher offices in the Party (Werblan 108), it becomes obvious that the minimum plan did not succeed as well.

In *Native Realm*, Czesław Miłosz depicts a scene where Russian soldiers, sitting in a peasant's house, are calming down a German war prisoner wearing a warm sheepskin coat. They assure him that he is in no danger, that for him the war is over and that he will be sent to the rear right away. One of them without a word gets up and walks outside with the prisoner. Miłosz writes: "In a few minutes the soldier returned alone, dragging a white sheepskin coat that he threw next to his duffel bag". And then goadingly asks: "cruelty?" (Miłosz 1981: 141-142). Miłosz answers his own question: "but one has to place that incident in the context of that war". He reminds us, perhaps under the influence of Kroński, of the thousands of Soviet prisoners exterminated by Germans and the millions in planned executions. "But these Russian soldiers had murdered Germans not out of hatred but out of necessity. That necessity had taken the form either of the difficulties of transferring the prisoner to the rear or of a white sheepskin coat" (Miłosz 1981: 142). Miłosz does not rule out the possibility that the Soviet soldiers had the impression that something "cruel" had happened. He describes their behavior: a soldier who killed a prisoner: "sat down and rolled a cigarette. The melancholy way he inhaled his smoke and spat on the floor expressed the thoughts of all of them in that room on the frailty of human life: 'That's fate'" (Miłosz 1981: 141).

One can and should ask what one can do, one who does not have such a melancholy constitution, does not smoke cigarettes and does not have a tendency to spit on the floor. The answer to this question is relatively easy: nothing. It does not have much significance. In *The Seizure of Power*, the Red Army is presented as a blind force, impossible to stop, as it moves with the unstoppable force of lava. Piotr Kwinto, a character in the story, observes that this force of nature is reflected in the incessant movements of people and vehicles, military equipment and Soviet soldiers. (Miłosz 1995). The movement of this army is subject to the same laws of necessity, this time historic necessity much like the force of nature moving lava (Miłosz 1995).

During Wat's stay in Berkley, a conflict ensues between him and Miłosz. The cause of it was Miłosz's irritation at Wat's conviction that he will be greeted in America as a specialist on totalitarian Russia; meanwhile, he was not aware of the abundance of available literature and resources on Sovietology (Miłosz 1994). He was also not aware of the fact that no one, or almost no one, in America wants to hear about

such a Russia that he wants to and can talk about. Miłosz's opinion here resonates with Ewa Thompson's in relation to this kind of Sovietological discourse present in America and Western Europe. It is, according to Thompson, completely dominated by Russia.

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