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Captive Minds

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Some years ago I visited Krasnogruda, the restored manor house of Czesław Miłosz, close by the Polish–Lithuanian frontier. I was the guest of Krzysztof Czyżewski, director of the Borderland Foundation, dedicated to acknowledging the conflicted memory of this region and reconciling the local populations. It was deep midwinter and there were snow-covered fields as far as the eye could see, with just the occasional clump of ice-bound trees and posts marking the national frontiers.

My host waxed lyrical over the cultural exchanges planned for Miłosz’s ancestral home. I was absorbed in my own thoughts: some seventy miles north, in Pilviškiai (Lithuania), the Avigail side of my father’s family had lived and died (some at the hands of the Nazis). Our cousin Meyer London had emigrated in 1891 to New York from a nearby village; there he was elected in 1914 as the second Socialist congressman before being ousted by an ignominious alliance of wealthy New York Jews disturbed by his socialism and American Zionists aghast at his well-publicized suspicion of their project.

For Miłosz, Krasnogruda—“red soil”—was his “native realm” (*Rodzinna Europa* in the original Polish, better translated as European Fatherland or European Family).¹ But for me, staring over this stark white landscape, it stood for Jedwabne, Katyn, and Babi Yar—all within easy reach—not to mention dark memories closer to home. My host certainly knew all this: indeed, he was personally responsible for the controversial Polish publication of Jan Gross’s account of the massacre at Jedwabne.² But the presence of Poland’s greatest twentieth-century poet transcended the tragedy that stalks the region.

Miłosz was born in 1911 in what was then Russian Lithuania. Indeed, like many great Polish literary figures, he was not strictly “Polish” by geographical measure. Adam Zagajewski, one of the country’s most important living poets, was born in Ukraine; Jerzy Giedroyc—a major figure in the twentieth-century literary exile—was born in Belarus, like Adam Mickiewicz, the nineteenth-century icon of the Polish literary revival. Lithuanian Vilna in particular was a cosmopolitan blend of Poles, Lithuanians, Germans, Russians, and Jews, among others (Isaiah Berlin, like the Harvard political philosopher Judith Shklar, was born in nearby Riga).

Raised in the interwar Polish republic, Miłosz survived the occupation and was already a poet of some standing when he was sent to Paris as the cultural attaché of the new People's Republic. But in 1951 he defected to the West and two years later he published his most influential work, *The Captive Mind*.³ Never out of print, it is by far the most insightful and enduring account of the attraction of intellectuals to Stalinism and, more generally, of the appeal of authority and authoritarianism to the intelligentsia.

Miłosz studies four of his contemporaries and the self-delusions to which they fell prey on their journey from autonomy to obedience, emphasizing what he calls the intellectuals' need for "a feeling of belonging." Two of his subjects—Jerzy Andrzejewski and Tadeusz Borowski—may be familiar to English readers, Andrzejewski as the author of *Ashes and Diamonds* (adapted for the cinema by Andrzej Wajda) and Borowski as the author of a searing memoir of Auschwitz, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*.

But the book is most memorable for two images. One is the "Pill of Murti-Bing." Miłosz came across this in an obscure novel by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, *Insatiability* (1927). In this story, Central Europeans facing the prospect of being overrun by unidentified Asiatic hordes pop a little pill, which relieves them of fear and anxiety; buoyed by its effects, they not only accept their new rulers but are positively happy to receive them.

The second image is that of "Ketman," borrowed from Arthur de Gobineau's *Religions and Philosophies of Central Asia*, in which the French traveler reports the Persian phenomenon of elective identities. Those who have internalized the way of being called "Ketman" can live with the contradictions of saying one thing and believing another, adapting freely to each new requirement of their rulers while believing that they have preserved somewhere within themselves the autonomy of a free thinker—or at any rate a thinker who has freely chosen to subordinate himself to the ideas and dictates of others.

Ketman, in Miłosz's words, "brings comfort, fostering dreams of what might be, and even the enclosing fence affords the solace of reverie." Writing for the desk drawer becomes a sign of inner liberty. At least his audience *would* take him seriously if only they could read him:

Fear of the indifference with which the economic system of the West treats its artists and scholars is widespread among Eastern intellectuals. They say it is better to deal with an intelligent devil than with a good-natured idiot.

Between Ketman and the Pill of Murti-Bing, Miłosz brilliantly dissects the state of mind of the fellow traveler, the deluded idealist, and the cynical time server. His essay is more subtle than Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* and less relentlessly logical than Raymond Aron's *Opium of the Intellectuals*. I used to teach it in what was for many years my favorite course, a survey of essays and novels from Central and Eastern Europe that

included the writings of Milan Kundera, Václav Havel, Ivo Andrić, Heda Kovály, Paul Goma, and others.

But I began to notice that whereas the novels of Kundera and Andrić, or the memoirs of Kovály or Yevgenia Ginsburg, remain accessible to American students notwithstanding the alien material, *The Captive Mind* often encountered incomprehension. Miłosz takes for granted his readers' intuitive grasp of the believer's state of mind: the man or woman who has identified with History and enthusiastically aligned themselves with a system that denies them freedom of expression. In 1951 he could reasonably assume that this phenomenon—whether associated with communism, fascism, or indeed any other form of political repression—would be familiar.

And indeed, when I first taught the book in the 1970s, I spent most of my time explaining to would-be radical students just why a “captive mind” was not a good thing. Thirty years on, my young audience is simply mystified: Why would someone sell his soul to *any* idea, much less a repressive one? By the turn of the twenty-first century, few of my North American students had ever met a Marxist. A self-abnegating commitment to a secular faith was beyond their imaginative reach. When I started out, my challenge was to explain why people became disillusioned with Marxism; today, the insuperable hurdle one faces is explaining the illusion itself.

Contemporary students do not see the point of the book: the whole exercise seems futile. Repression, suffering, irony, and even religious belief: these they can grasp. But ideological self-delusion? Miłosz's posthumous readers thus resemble the Westerners and émigrés whose incomprehension he describes so well: “They do not know how one pays—those abroad do not know. They do not know what one buys, and at what price.”

Perhaps so. But there is more than one kind of captivity. Recall the Ketman-like trance of those intellectuals swept up in George W. Bush's hysterical drive to war just a few years ago. Few of them would have admitted to admiring the President, much less sharing his worldview. So they typically aligned themselves behind him while doubtless maintaining private reservations. Later, when it was clear they had made a mistake, they blamed it upon the administration's incompetence. With Ketman-like qualifications they proudly assert, in effect, “we were right to be wrong”—a revealing if unconscious echo of the *plaidoyer* of the French fellow travelers, “better to have been wrong with Sartre than right with Aron.”

Today, we can still hear sputtering echoes of the attempt to reignite the cold war around a crusade against “Islamofascism.” But the true mental captivity of our time lies elsewhere. Our contemporary faith in “the market” rigorously tracks its radical nineteenth-century doppelgänger—the unquestioning belief in necessity, progress, and History. Just as the hapless British Labour chancellor in 1929–1931, Philip Snowden, threw up his hands in

the face of the Depression and declared that there was no point opposing the ineluctable laws of capitalism, so Europe's leaders today scuttle into budgetary austerity to appease "the markets."

But "the market"—like "dialectical materialism"—is just an abstraction: at once ultra-rational (its argument trumps all) and the acme of unreason (it is not open to question). It has its true believers—mediocre thinkers by contrast with the founding fathers, but influential withal; its fellow travelers—who may privately doubt the claims of the dogma but see no alternative to preaching it; and its victims, many of whom in the US especially have dutifully swallowed their pill and proudly proclaim the virtues of a doctrine whose benefits they will never see.

Above all, the thrall in which an ideology holds a people is best measured by their collective inability to imagine alternatives. We know perfectly well that untrammelled faith in unregulated markets kills: the rigid application of what was until recently the "Washington consensus" in vulnerable developing countries—with its emphasis on tight fiscal policy, privatization, low tariffs, and deregulation—has destroyed millions of livelihoods. Meanwhile, the stringent "commercial terms" on which vital pharmaceuticals are made available has drastically reduced life expectancy in many places. But in Margaret Thatcher's deathless phrase, "there is no alternative."

It was in just such terms that communism was presented to its beneficiaries following World War II; and it was because History afforded no apparent alternative to a Communist future that so many of Stalin's foreign admirers were swept into intellectual captivity. But when Miłosz published *The Captive Mind*, Western intellectuals were still debating among genuinely competitive social models—whether social democratic, social market, or regulated market variants of liberal capitalism. Today, despite the odd Keynesian protest from below the salt, a consensus reigns.

For Miłosz, "the man of the East cannot take Americans seriously because they have never undergone the experiences that teach men how relative their judgments and thinking habits are." This is doubtless so and explains the continuing skepticism of the Eastern European in the face of Western innocence. But there is nothing innocent about Western (and Eastern) commentators' voluntary servitude before the new pan-orthodoxy. Many of them, Ketman-like, know better but prefer not to raise their heads above the parapet. In this sense at least, they have something truly in common with the intellectuals of the Communist age. One hundred years after his birth, fifty-seven years after the publication of his seminal essay, Miłosz's indictment of the servile intellectual rings truer than ever: "his chief characteristic is his fear of thinking for himself."

1 Czesław Miłosz, *Native Realm: A Search for Self-Definition (Rodzinna Europa)* (1959; Doubleday, 1968). ↵

- 2 Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton University Press, 2001). ↵
- 3 Czesław Miłosz, *The Captive Mind* (*Zniewolony umysł*) (1953; Vintage, 1981). ↵

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