

PIOTR PIERTYCH

MIŁOSZ'S NON-EXISTENT BOOK ABOUT AMERICA IN THE 1940S

Abstract: This paper sketches Miłosz's (non)-existing book on America, consisting of his numerous articles and columns written during his first stay in the United States from 1946 to 1950. They were published in the Polish literary press, often under pen names (such as "Jan M. Nowak" or "Żagarysta"). The book is a significant record of the period: the political transformations at the beginning of the Cold War and the Anti-Americanism that was gaining popularity among European intellectuals in the late 1940s.

Key words: Miłosz in America, European Anti-Americanism in the 1940s, post-war literary life in Poland

Write a book about the USA, Kazimierz Wyka encouraged Czesław Miłosz in the autumn of 1947 (Miłosz 2007: 130). Although Miłosz never published such a book, he did actually pursue the idea: during his stay in the US, from the beginning of 1946 till mid 1950, and especially between 1946–1948, he published a number of texts in the Polish literary press which were either entirely dedicated to the political, social and cultural specifics of the USA, or where such specifics formed an important motif and context, through, for instance, the presentation of eminent figures in American literature.

The aim of this study is to outline the most interesting motifs of this potential book by Miłosz on 1940s America. However, prior to completing this goal, we ought to formulate a few remarks on the texts and their contexts.

We ought to begin with some basic bibliographical observations, since not only do we still lack a complete compilation of Miłosz's post-war

publications, but even the hallowed volumes of the *Polska Bibliografia Literacka* [Polish Literary Bibliography] have failed to keep track of all of them. This particularly concerns the all-important articles and columns of the *Życie w USA* [Life in the USA] series, which Miłosz published in *Odrodzenie* [Rebirth] under the pen name Jan M. Nowak. Studying these texts involves leafing through the issues of *Odrodzenie* by hand, an effort well worth making: Jan M. Nowak appeared in the magazine as many as nineteen times between December 1946 and November 1947. If one includes articles signed with the penname Żagarysta¹ or the author's real name, the number of Miłosz's texts from 1946–1950 adds up to thirty, providing a fair image of how the poet viewed life in the USA at that time; if brought together they would constitute a volume of considerable size.

These are mainly unexplored texts, not for of a lack of bibliographical information, but primarily because they have not been reprinted. Today's reception of Miłosz's post-war writings is marked by a distinct paradox: one can access (a selection of) his private correspondence from this period more easily than his publications, sketches and essays, since the former are found in the *Zaraz po wojnie* [Right after the War] volume; to access the latter, one has to go to a library and leaf through the archives of literary journals from the 1940s.

Some of these publications were reprinted in *Kontynenty* [Continents] in 1958, though he showed an offhand attitude towards his own texts. *Notatnik amerykański* [American Notebook], which opens the section entitled *Ameryka* [America] in *Kontynenty*, was preceded by a short introduction, in which the author states:

A longer period of time is preserved in these scraps. Some were scattered through articles, and I have extracted them from redundant tissue that joins them. Others survived in a notebook. (...) Most were published in 1948, in Warsaw's *Nowiny Literackie* [Literary News] (Miłosz 1999: 35).

These are by no means precise statements. It is hard to speak of the texts published after 1948 in Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz's weekly being filled out with texts preserved in a *notebook* when *Kontynenty* features only one short paragraph absent from *Nowiny* (a quote from the author's wife, Janka, concerning her negative opinion of a novel; cf. Miłosz 1999: 73; compare

¹ This pen name in Polish comes from the name of the Żagary poetry group, Miłosz belonged to before the war.

Nowiny Literackie 1948 No. 15²). Editorial work consisted less in removing the “tissue that joins them” (because in their original form the *scraps* of text constituted a set of loosely connected notes), than in shortening them, which sometimes meant removing entire notes. As a result, *Kontynenty* contains approximately two thirds of what Miłosz published in 1948.

If we compare the 1958 versions with the originals, we can assume that Miłosz decided to cut and edit the texts for different reasons. Sometimes it seems to be because a given note was too strongly rooted in its immediate context and thus, years later, it was scarcely comprehensible. But what strikes us most today is that the 1958 versions were stripped of expressions and statements that could be associated with a left-wing style and the official language of Polish press from the latter half of the 1940s. Thus, in *Kontynenty* one searches in vain for the text about a New York news-stand proprietor who hides magazines which are “not even Communist, but liberal and left-wing;” in 1948 Miłosz saw this news-stand owner’s behaviour as telling, and commented on it as follows: “I puzzle over this in vain: does he oppose the politics these magazines represent, or has he been ordered to do so by his employer”³ (*Nowiny Literackie* 1948, No. 8). Nor does *Kontynenty* include his commentary on a letter by a young American who writes about the confusion of his generation’s worldview – a commentary in which Miłosz perceived “America’s descent into gloomy political reactionism” (*Nowiny Literackie* 1948, No. 15). There is no account of a social meeting during which guests *dolefully* discussed Henry Wallace, “a leading figure of the progressive movement”, the most leftist and pro-Soviet candidate in the 1948 presidential election (his candidacy was officially supported by the Communist Party of the USA, among others), who was “considered a bad politician;” this fragment is given a dramatic finale in *Nowiny Literackie*:

All these conversations (...) reflect a deeply depressing and unsettling backdrop. In my mind’s eye I can see a photograph of Greek revolutionaries executed by firing squad in a field near Athens, I hear the drama at the Place de l’Étoile in Paris, Communists battling the police, the dull thud of rubber clubs

² I will mark the references to Miłosz’s press publications from the 1940s in this way; they are listed in the first part of the Bibliography. In one special case, in *Odrodzenie* 1947 No. 7, where Miłosz published two articles, I identify his texts by their titles.

³ Czesław Miłosz’s publications from the 1940s investigated in the study have never been translated into English; in this article they appear in Michał Choński’s translation.

in the darkness, shouts of “Salandus!,” “Garce,” and “Fascistes!” (*Nowiny Literackie* 1948, No. 15).

It is easy to explain why these phrases and fragments are absent from the versions in *Notatnik amerykański* of 1958: a leftist outlook on the world and leftist language were unambiguously associated with Communist propaganda, which the author of *Kontynenty*, then a political emigrant, had distanced himself from. This decisiveness was not visible in his texts from the latter half of the 1940s, when Miłosz, like so many other Polish writers, identified himself with left-wing views in their broadest definition. It would be a mistake, however, to reduce his attitude to a general submission to the Communist domination in post-war Poland. We should recall that during the German occupation Miłosz belonged to the *Wolność* [Freedom] underground socialist organisation.

The basic context for Miłosz’s writings of the second half of the 1940s was not only the author’s worldview at the time, but also the specific nature of the period, which is generally seen in a simplistic fashion in our day. Miłosz himself contributed to this, as the author of *The Captive Mind* and *The Seizure of Power*, publications in which the Communists’ rise to power is presented as an inevitably escalating process of conquest by the *Nowa Wiara idąca ze Wschodu* [New Faith coming from the East; Miłosz 2009: 22), strengthened by terror. This image is so simplistic that it verges on a “gross error,” or even goes beyond, an observation I make on the basis of Miłosz’s writings themselves. I make a reference here to a fascinating letter to Melchior Wańkowicz from early 1952 which is utterly inconsistent with *The Captive Mind*, though written at the same time. Miłosz tries to convince Wańkowicz that “Poland of 1945–1951 ought not to be treated en masse”, because it leads one to unpardonable mistakes, and that one should avoid exaggeration and take into account changes triggered by “the removal of Gomułka,” he also announces decisively, but also provocatively: “In literature, in study – if only things could be as they were until 1948, maybe it would be much better than whatever could be gained by any sort of emigration after their return” (Miłosz 1981: 101).

In this letter to Wańkowicz, Miłosz points out the role of censorship, which in the post-war history of Poland and the history of Polish culture of the time, was implemented by the *plenum sierpniowe PPR* [August Council of the Polish Worker’s Party] from the turning point of August and September 1948, wherein Władysław Gomułka, accused of “right-wing and nationalistic inclinations,” was stripped of Party leadership. The August

Council opens Poland's Stalinisation period, which became visible in culture with the implementation of the doctrine of social realism. The earlier period was a time of relative post-war liberalism in culture, a "gentle revolution" – to use the popular name coined by Jerzy Borejsza – whose specificity was revealed with the culmination of this "gentleness" more than a year before the August Council, in 1947 and early 1948. During these months it seemed that an acceptable *modus vivendi* with the Communist authorities was being developed, and that in exchange for support of the post-war political and social transitions one would be allowed to make art in relative freedom. The appearance of Iwaszkiewicz's *Nowiny Literackie* [Literary News] weekly in March 1947 was an important event at that time – the magazine was tentatively, but evidently, inspired by the pre-war *Wiadomości Literackie* [Literary Bulletins]. Another important and telling event was when the *Odrodzenie* weekly granted Iwaszkiewicz the most important literary award of the time for his *Nowa miłość* [New Love] and *Nowele włoskie* [Italian Novellas] short story collections – texts which had nothing to do with the Marxist outlook on reality and literature, and most of which were written before 1945.⁴ In his letter to Wańkiewicz, Miłosz recalls the "gentle revolution;" it is in this period that he published most of his press articles and essays in post-war Poland.

Another important context for Miłosz's texts on America is the way the global political situation was perceived at the time: the sense of "the end of Europe"⁵ and its domination by the world's two superpowers, the Soviet Union and the United States. The logic of this vision suggested that Eastern Europe's dependence on the Soviet Union was analogous to Western Europe's dependence on the United States – which obviously triggered anti-American attitudes. This vision was employed by Communist propaganda, because it conditioned Poland's dependence on its eastern neighbour. Still, it needs to be stressed that at the time this vision was universally adopted in both Poland and in Western Europe, especially considering that the events tied to the formation of the post-war political reality and which marked the beginning of the Cold War seemed to confirm and reinforce it; in a letter

⁴ In this article I only signal the particular features of the "gentle revolution" in post-war culture. The topic is extensively discussed in the second part of my book *Aleksander Wat w Polsce powojennej (1946–1953)* [Aleksander Wat in Post-war Poland (1946–1953)].

⁵ In 1945, in Krakow, I experienced the end of Europe. It even amazes me that the acute consciousness of the end was registered so inadequately by myself and by others, Miłosz wrote forty years later in *The Year of the Hunter* (1995: 238).

written in the summer of 1946, Miłosz stresses that the post-war period was an “era (...) of a gloomy Congress of Vienna” (Miłosz 2007: 533).⁶ The shock caused by the use of atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 also sparked negative attitudes towards the United States. I stress the similarities between some of the popular opinions and attitudes and the Communist propaganda because such an approach allows us to view the anti-Americanism present in Miłosz’s publications and his private letters (sometimes in a particularly vivid form) from that time as generally authentic and genuine.

After these necessarily extensive contextual remarks, we should move on to investigate Miłosz’s book, scattered throughout his publications. It has its inner dramaturgy, set by the author’s changing views, and can be divided into three sections. The first includes his texts from 1946, the second from the first half of 1947 and the third from the other three years of Miłosz’s stay in the USA, when the pace of his writing gradually decreased. Among Miłosz’s texts we can also single out articles that could serve as a prologue and an epilogue to this non-existent book on America.

The function of a prologue is well – once could say suspiciously well – served by the essay *Nad obcą prasą* [Over the Foreign Press], published in October 1945, and thus before Miłosz ever travelled to the United States. The essay contains an account of his reading of the Western European press, and a rather detailed reading, for that matter. Miłosz presents an account of a witness to the atomic explosion in Hiroshima, and declaring his interest in *minor events that spur the imagination*, he mentions the special “Brides’ Club” set up by the Red Cross for the French wives of American soldiers, as well as the problems faced by the authorities in Germany’s American-occupied zone, where an increasing number of soldiers and officers asked for permission to marry German women. The dominant role of the American motif – the United States’ explicit guilt with regards to the Hiroshima tragedy, the imposing presence of American troops in Western Europe – is striking, and this slanted reading of the Western press suggests that the author, who was applying for a diplomatic post, purposefully highlighted his anti-Americanism. Still, his post-war and anti-German trauma, as well as his sense of European superiority over the Americans, seems authentic:

⁶ Tony Judt writes on anti-American trends in Western Europe in the opening of his splendid history of post-war Europe (Judt 2008).

These soldiers and officers learnt nothing, nothing entered their consciousness – they remained indifferent to the European night of suffering. They will take wives from *hitlerjungend* – they will take blue-eyed, fair-haired angels, shaped not unlike their counterparts who murdered in cold blood in Belsen and in Auschwitz (*Odrodzenie* 1945, No. 48).

Miłosz went to America with a negative attitude, which was swiftly and fully reinforced. His publications on American reality in 1946 are marked by an unpleasant sense of European superiority over a society which seems incapable of understanding the European because of a different sum of experiences, but also because of an essential infantilism, as critically demonstrated by a Catholic audience laughing at the Passion. This encounter of a traveller from a devastated Europe with a society living in prosperity was a shock for Miłosz and prompted him to make glaring generalisations. In the same article, Miłosz describes the disgusting American Christian, rendered in the form of a rhetorical question for Polish Catholic writers:

Is a man whose conscience is calm as a pond in summer, whose fat face chews a cigar, whose sole aim is to seek pleasure, earn money and then seek pleasure again, really the type of man for whom we yearned? (*Przekrój* 1946, No. 79).

We might doubt the validity of such stark suggestions and judgements expressed after only a few months' stay in America. Miłosz seemed aware of this, and he particularly tried to justify conclusions drawn from superficial observations, formulated on the basis of the impression made by American towns seen through a car window:

My eye tried to capture the atmosphere of their life – I know that an atmosphere of human communities can be captured, that one can learn it from gestures, from the rhythm of movements, from voices in the air. It is powerfully magnetic and every human being has an aerial for receiving it (*Kuźnica* 1946, No. 38).

In Miłosz's risky generalisations one cannot fail to perceive a "European egoist who thinks that misfortune is a uniquely European privilege," as the author himself phrases it when, in one of his American insights, he presents a conversation with a "cute, polite and silly" girl who hides a personal drama: a fiancé who died during the war (*Nowiny Literackie*, 1948 No. 8). Miłosz was capable of ridding himself of his sense of superiority, but fragments such as the above, written later, in 1948, are rare.

At the end of 1946, one notes a visible, almost radical change in Miłosz's publications, which might be explained by the fact that the author

had already acclimatised to the American reality. The external impulse of this change is somewhat paradoxical: Miłosz had begun to write under a pen name. Primarily it was Jan M. Nowak⁷ who appeared in the pages of *Odrodzenie*, as the author of a series of articles and essays entitled *Życie w USA*, subtitled *Od specjalnego wysłannika "Odrodzenia"* [From *Odrodzenie's* Special Correspondent]. Jan M. Nowak reported on political, social and cultural events in the USA, and his approach to the American reality (also visible in other texts by Miłosz from that period signed Żagarysta or with his own name) is striking – he describes life in the USA with both distance and a kindness of sorts. One is also surprised (in the context of his previous publications) by a conscious and overt aversion to hasty generalisations – the author even cautions against them, as they “are not the most reliable path to the truth” (*Odrodzenie* 1947, No. 21). This radical shift in Miłosz’s attitude is further proven by a contrast between the caricature image of the American Christian in the 1946 article and the moderation that characterises Jan M. Nowak’s account of religion in the USA and the religiousness of its citizens: “the author of this article is short of data. This is a country attached to conventions, hollow as they may be, and it is hard to determine what lies beneath” (*Odrodzenie* 1947, No. 11).

His polemics with the Marxist-oriented *Kuźnica* are also telling. In one issue of this magazine (1946 No. 48, 10 December), a photo of a masked member of “faszystowska organizacja amerykańska Ku-Klux-Klan” [The Fascist American Ku-Klux-Klan organisation] appeared on the front page alongside a photo of a crowd gathered under a tree where two African Americans had been hanged – the pictures appeared under the mocking title *Jedna z czterech wolności... Wolność od strachu* [One of four freedoms... Freedom from fear]. Making reference to this publication, Jan M. Nowak light-heartedly, but decisively observes: “Portraying America as a country where blacks are lynched is as correct as arguing that in Poland everyone wears bowler hats, because this is what carriage drivers wear in Kraków.” He does not deny discrimination against the black community, yet he stresses that it is less visible in acts of violence, which are drastic but rare, than in the impossibility of social advancement, which does not change the fact that the “quality of life in the black community, very poor by American standards, is at present probably far superior to that of the Polish people” (*Odrodzenie* 1947, No. 7, *Życie w USA*).

⁷ As a letter from Karol Kuryluk, editor-in-chief of *Odrodzenie*, seems to indicate, he suggested this pen-name to Miłosz, as it would “appeal to the average Pole” (Miłosz 2007: 573).

Miłosz only managed to maintain Jan M. Nowak's objectivity in the first half of 1947, though in his "(non)existent book" about America there are numerous texts which express such an attitude: of the nineteen letters from *Odrodzenie's* special correspondent, as many as fourteen were published by July of that year. Thereafter, Miłosz markedly changed his attitude, as we see in his use of generalisations and stark conclusions.

The radicalism of this next period is clearly visible in a text Jan M. Nowak published in early August 1947, where the author enters into a debate with himself. Quoting his own comment on the issue of the discrimination of the black community from a few months previous, he undermines his own standpoint: he asserts that "a few lynchings every year effectively serves to keep the black community in check." The article includes an extensive critique of "the American myth," an idealised image of the United States as a "fairytale country," located somewhere between "a Biblical paradise and a theme park." Miłosz conducts this demythologisation through a description of – in his own words – "the heart of darkness" of the American political and social order, while introducing a scathing analogy between the United States and Hitler's Germany: the other side of an idyllic "centre" are the crimes perpetrated on the "outskirts." This description of the United States, whose wealth is built upon the "heart of darkness," racism and violence towards the black community, and the economic exploitation of Latin America, closes with this statement (the text was stylised as a letter to a Polish girl, Zosia, who believes in the *American Dream*): "If you were born in Sao Paulo instead of Poland, I believe you would know the sadness of a peripheral existence framed with powerlessness" (*Odrodzenie* 1947, No. 31).

This phrase seems ambiguous: "the sadness of a peripheral existence framed with powerlessness" was probably quite familiar to the inhabitants of Central Europe countries (like Poland) which remained under the sway of the Soviet Union after the war. It is uncertain, however, if this ambiguity was intentional. Helplessness is a motif which appears in different sections – in fact, it seems to permeate the whole article, which features harsh descriptions of the American empire. With the changes in the political situation, objectivity and kindness towards America proved impossible to maintain; more importantly, Miłosz's attitude became focused on the actions taken by the United States government.⁸

⁸ This letter written by Jan M. Nowak, which includes the *heart of darkness* metaphor, which is key to his criticism towards the United States, constitutes an important, but ne-

On 12 March 1947, President Truman delineated the prerogatives of US foreign policy in a speech delivered in Congress, declaring aid for countries threatened by invasion or by a *coup d'état*. This policy, known as the Truman doctrine, was rather general, but its anti-Communist and anti-Soviet nature was evident. Truman's speech was an event which signalled the era of the Cold War: open hostility between two political systems and the two world superpowers. In these changing political conditions it was difficult to write amiable texts about the United States, as such an approach became politically incorrect in the Polish press. In Miłosz's changing attitude one can also trace an authentic fear of a confrontation between the two superpowers, in which the helpless citizens of the People's Republics could become – regardless of their intentions and political sympathies – potential victims of a nuclear attack.⁹

Over time, the balanced reports on life in the USA ceased to be possible, both objectively and subjectively. Jan M. Nowak began to appear more seldom in *Odrodzenie*. The last pieces under this pen-name appeared at the end of November 1947. They are noteworthy because the author organises the chapters, as he calls them, of his often contradictory thoughts on American reality so that the negative ones are decidedly in the majority. Equality, freedom and economic liberalism are shown to be myths, while the cosy life of Americans is threatened by politicians on whom average citizens have little impact (*Odrodzenie* 1947, No. 48). The three texts on America which Miłosz published in 1948 are of a different, more personal, almost lyrical, character.

Although the political events in the USA and Poland had an impact on Miłosz's publications, politics were not most important for him.

For Miłosz, the country he inhabited for the latter half of the 1940s was primarily a cultural phenomenon. *The American lifestyle and mentality are curious to the European observer* – he noted at the beginning of his stay

glected context for *Moral Treatise* and its famous ending – Miłosz was finishing this poem at the same time, in the summer of 1947. I have to confess that I myself neglected this context when I criticised the anachronistic reading of *Moral Treatise* as a strictly anti-Stalinist work – a legend that was born at the beginning of the 1950s (Pietrych 2011, Chapter VI).

⁹ This fear was overtly expressed in Wyka's aforementioned letter, dated 6 December 1947. The author encourages Miłosz to write a book on America and resignedly remarks: *Only, if tensions in the world continue to deepen, if on your side of the globe are more and more people who think that Russians should be immediately killed off, I am not sure you'll actually have the time to write it. Where will this madness lead us?* (Miłosz 2007: 130).

in the USA (*Kuźnica* 1946, No. 38), using phrases that seem somewhat euphemistic. In Miłosz's descriptions and notes, especially those on average Americans, one finds harsh and strident language, demonstrating his strongly negative attitude. Miłosz usually¹⁰ saw the Americans as living a “physiological existence,”¹¹ immersed in “mental apathy” to such an extent that they were

living automatons, laughing, working, procreating, live puppets with utterly mythologised brains, a tribe of the machine era, with dogs, and chickens, and glittering corn, and in which one spends whole afternoons on the front porch of a village house, with no trace of the written word, except perhaps for a detective story (*Odrodzenie* 1947, No. 48).

There is also a reference to Huxley's famous dystopia:

In *Brave New World* Huxley presents a future that is very much like American society. America is a country of rugged girls and men judged solely from the point of view of their sexual and financial prowess (...) (*Przekrój* 1946, No. 79).¹²

These harsh judgements and opinions can be summarised briefly, recalling what Miłosz wrote twenty years later, in *Visions from San Francisco Bay*:

To consider the citizens of any country (...) depraved creatures, blameless idiots, but idiots nonetheless, is to condemn oneself to intellectual arrogance (1983: 190).

Miłosz exhibited this *intellectual arrogance*, but it may seem worthwhile to look at the motives that lay behind this impulsive stance. His description of average Americans as *living automatons* closes with an observation that plays a key role: “with no trace of the written word, except perhaps for a detective story.” The fact that Americans devote themselves to the “pseudo-arts” (*Kuźnica* 1946, No. 38), that they willingly expose

¹⁰ Sometimes inconsistently following left-wing ideas, Miłosz wrote about average Americans with solicitude — when he presented them as subjects of “auctions” and political games with no impact on reality (*Odrodzenie* 1947, No. 46).

¹¹ This term often recurs in Miłosz's American texts of this period, including some better known ones; cf. e.g., *Wprowadzenie w Amerykanów* [An Introduction to the Americans] (*Twórczość* 1948, No. 5: 26; Miłosz 1999: 119).

¹² Cf. remarks about magazines which include “porcja erotycznej ‘somy’, jak to nazywał Huxley” [a sample of erotic “soma”, as Huxley called it]; Miłosz also employs Huxley's motif in his poetry from the period, in the poem “Nie ma wzroku” [There's No Sight].

themselves to an *opiate for masses*, the Hollywood cinema, evokes his avid aversion:

What to call this opiate? In this country drug dealers are skilfully apprehended, the dealers from Hollywood earn millions by killing the minds and hearts of the nation (...) The poison consists in limiting the horizons of the viewer's mind, keeping it in a permanent state of idiocy. An analysis of American movies is a most interesting activity for a moralist. It is an ideal form of complete dictatorship (*Nowiny Literackie* 1948, No. 15).

Miłosz's responses to the *pseudo-arts* can be so extreme as to verge on the grotesque. For instance, in his commentary to the 1946 best-seller *Egg and I*, a cheerful story of a farm owned by *one Mrs MacDonald*, Miłosz literally frames his condemnation in global terms:

The earth, more politically divided than ever, is a unity. If caring for the future of mankind matters, then some symptoms visible in America may be viewed as deadly serious. Can the reading of *Egg and I* by a few million readers be seen as some kind of symptom, and can the reading of ten such books have no impact on the mind (...)? I suppose it might (*Przekrój* 1946, No. 79).

Miłosz sees the popularity of radio as equally damaging:

The American radio is chiefly a nightmare and it is inexplicable how the millions of listeners have not been driven into a state of complete idiocy. Listening for half a day to light music and announcements at home, in a taxi or even in the train is a perfect way to dull the mind (*Odrodzenie* 1947, No. 1).

For Miłosz the shock of the reality of the United States is, to a large extent, a confrontation with a society for which mass culture plays an important role. His strategy of coping with this distress consists in evaluating the Europe-America opposition. The statement that "America is the rightful heir to Raphael and Tintoretto is evidently untrue" and constitutes an abuse of truth notoriously repeated by American propaganda (*Nowiny Literackie* 1948, No. 15). The United States of America represents a "mechanical civilisation," which, as an "unprecedented phenomenon," is not the next stage of Western civilisation's development – "unfortunately, it is not comprehended, though European models are applied to it" – and is a distinct and independent phenomenon (*Nowiny Literackie* 1948, No. 8).

Miłosz criticised the state of things in which mass *pseudo-art* satisfied the cultural needs of the majority; it ought to be stressed, however, that his criticism was based on incongruent assumptions. Miłosz himself was

a *European observer* who manifested a strong aversion to the *lifestyle and mentality* of American citizens – yet one is hard pressed to see him as a typical representative of the Old Continent. He does even not try to prove that an average European is more refined than an average American in terms of taste and cultural aspirations. General remarks about Europe's cultural superiority are used in place of arguments (for instance: "In Europe, the Medieval period, the Renaissance and Baroque had a certain territorial scope, this stratification is visible in folk culture, in folk painting, for instance;" *Nowiny Literackie* 1948, No. 15). The emotional aspect of the contrast between Europe, marked by the experience of war, and America, enjoying comfort and abundance, seems to play an important role (*Odrodzenie* 1947, No. 48).

The fact that Miłosz does not see the holes in his arguments, or that he ignores them completely, can be explained not only by the arrogance of the intellectual, but also by a peculiar attempt to shield himself from an awareness of the anachronism of this stance, painfully confronted with reality. Miłosz came to the United States from a country where, immediately following the war, a discussion opened about cultural improvement of the masses, and he joined this debate even before his departure in the summer of 1945. His short article *Sztuka dla wszystkich* [Art for Everyone] is filled with strident declarations, which should be quoted here, because they give a sense of the tone and type of argument which seemed natural and suitable in Poland:

There is one practical goal that everyone should strive to achieve: it consists in making it possible for all people to access all the **goods** of the earth. Every human being is entitled to bread, and to all the joys that are available on our globe (...)

Among all the goods that we enjoy, the pleasures art provides may be the most demanding, but they are also the most enduring. It is an inalienable part of human progress, expressing the longing for higher and higher forms, for the more efficient conquering of the world's resistance. The experience of art cannot be the privilege of a select few. It becomes such a privilege only where a great many people live in such poor conditions and in such ignorance that they have neither the time, nor the willingness to occupy themselves with higher matters. (...)

The human right to art would be a feeble one if he only received a substitute that went by the name of art. Shakespeare and Mickiewicz, and Ve-

lázquez and Titian belong to every human being. The only reward for the terrible struggles of our age is the right to real art (*Przekrój* 1945, No. 18).

These lofty statements allow us to better understand Miłosz's aversion to average Americans: although they live in prosperity, they seem unwilling to exercise their "right to real art" and they prefer to read *detective* stories instead of Shakespeare and watch Hollywood films instead of delighting in Velázquez.

From today's perspective, Miłosz's thoughts on the cultural improvement of the masses may seem naive, yet they were neither characteristic of him alone, nor were they uniquely Polish – on the contrary, they were a constant element of post-Enlightenment visions of European intellectuals on the goal to which social change should be directed. These visions were questioned in the early 20th century by the growth of mass culture, especially in the most modern society – America. It is no accident that it was in the America of the 1940s that one of the first, most violent attempts at the negation of mass culture was formulated, by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), with its concept of the repressive "cultural industry." Miłosz seems to agree with such a viewpoint, describing Hollywood cinema as "the most perfect means of complete dictatorship."

Obviously, the image of the United States in Miłosz's texts is not uniform. While rejecting and condemning the phenomenon of mass culture, Miłosz is aware of the great merits of American literature. He presents the eminent works of Melville, Hemingway and Faulkner, introduces American poets to the Polish reader, he also ascribes to American writers the important role of "the just ones who (...) disturb the slumbering conscience of their society" (*Odrodzenie* 1947, No. 31). Nonetheless, he admits that, in the long run, in a country dominated by mass culture and commercial mechanisms "the existence of a writer is (...), in most cases, miserable" (*Odrodzenie* 1948, No. 39).

However surprising this conclusion seems to us today, from the perspective of the America of the late 1940s, Poland during the "gentle revolution" seemed to Miłosz a far more attractive country, partly due to the social *atmosphere*:

Art needs atmosphere in order to thrive. This obvious statement can be translated into practical terms: it is good when the artist has the right of citizenship in a city or country equal to the right of a shoemaker or a teacher, and it is wrong when he has to apologise to society for living, and must paint, in one context,

a portrait of the Führer, and in another, a modern Venus in a bra for a company that produces this alluring garment (*Odrodzenie* 1947, No. 7, “Abstrakcja i poszukiwania” [Abstraction and seeking]).

The artist in Poland during the “gentle revolution” did not have to apologise for being alive, nor was he forced to paint a Venus in a bra, he did not have to paint a portrait of the Führer or – for the time being, of “generalissimos” – he was given the “right of citizenship” in society and his importance and status were made clear. Here we should point out the surprisingly positive description of literary life in post-war Poland which Miłosz included in his letter to Wańkowicz.

One can find two epilogues to the (non)existent book on the United States of the 1940s. The first is a chapter of *The Captive Mind* entitled *Zachód* [Looking to the West]. In his discussion of the attitude of an intellectual who experienced war in Eastern Europe towards Western Europe and America, Miłosz also touches upon his own attitude from the second half of the 1940s. In this chapter, the author’s stance is unclear: it is hard to determine if Miłosz (still) maintains his criticism to the West, or is (now) only a commentator.

The function of the second epilogue could be served by the *Kultura Masowa* [Mass Culture] anthology, edited by Miłosz as the first Polish publication dedicated to this topic and published as part of the Biblioteka “Kultury” [Library of Culture] series in 1959. In his introduction to a new edition of this anthology, Jerzy Sawicki, a great authority of Polish sociology, states: “In the face of Czesław Miłosz’s enormous output” *Kultura Masowa* “may seem a publication of little significance” (*Kultura Masowa* 2002: 5). We may find it hard to agree, however. The author of the anthology seems correct:

By dealing with the matter I do not, I think, go beyond my area of expertise. Literature and art should be aware of the conditions in which they are to evolve and they cannot underestimate a powerful rival, that is, the culture of popular entertainment (*Kultura Masowa* 2002: 12).

Miłosz also contemplated the end of the hopes of “dreamers from the previous century, who believed that mass education will elevate millions of citizens to their status” (*Kultura Masowa* 2002: 13), dreams not unfamiliar to the author himself in the previous decade. After half a century, the anthology itself has become an interesting testimony to impulsive aversion, full of disgust and the intellectual arrogance which mass culture evoked in

the mid 20th century among the representatives of so-called high culture (whose defenders in the anthology, *nota bene*, are American authors). At any rate – and perhaps this is where one should look for the source of Szacki's opinion – the 1959 anthology turned out to be a blind alley in Miłosz's oeuvre, as in subsequent years he began to express his attitude (and aversion) towards contemporary civilisation and culture in a religious, not a cultural, idiom.

In conclusion, I wish to return to a note preceding “Notatnik amerykański” [American Notebook] in *Kontynenty*. Miłosz states:

Usually, these are not the observations of a novice, so typical of a person who has just arrived in New York from a downtrodden Poland in a tattered coat, with a cardboard suitcase. The impressions of an utter novice defy words: a jet-speed trip to past, towards normality, which, it seems, no longer exists anywhere (Miłosz 1999: 35).

This statement hardly seems credible. Neither at the beginning of his stay in the US, nor in subsequent years, did Miłosz see the discovery of American reality as a return to a past identified with normality, which, incidentally, would suggest a positive evaluation. He occasionally observes that “this New York is utterly ordinary and familiar. Nothing other than pre-1939 Warsaw multiplied, and points out that a European walking down the streets of New York is forever catching himself dreaming of a return to a lifestyle and problems from fifteen years before.” The first is merely a descriptive phrase, aimed to stress – through contrast with the sense of familiarity – the completely distinct nature of American “technological civilisation” (*Nowiny Literackie* 1948, No. 8), but the second is an observation of a distinctly negative tone (*Przekrój* 1946, No. 19). The censorship of war experiences and the emphasis on the post-war political situation were so strong that in the second half of the 1940s Miłosz perceived the American reality as distinctly un-usual, and as such, ab-normal.

Trans. Michał Choiński

Bibliography

Texts by Czesław Miłosz published in the Polish Press in the second half of the 1940s quoted in the article:

- Kuźnica* [Forge] 1946, No. 38, 30 IX, *O Hemingway'u* [On Hemingway], 5–7.
Nowiny Literackie [Literary News] 1948, No. 8, 22 II, *Notatnik* [Notes], 1.
Nowiny Literackie 1948, No. 15, 11 IV, *Notatnik*, 1–2.
Odrodzenie [Rebirth] 1945, No. 48, 28 X, *Nad obcą prasą* [Over the Foreign Press], 8.
Odrodzenie 1947, No. 1, 5 I, Jan M. Nowak, *Życie w USA* [Life in the USA], 7.
Odrodzenie 1947, No. 6, 9 II, Żagarysta, *Książki i pisma w Stanach Zjednoczonych* [Books and Magazines in the United States], 1–3.
Odrodzenie 1947, No. 7, 16 II, *Abstrakcja i poszukiwania* [Abstraction and Seeking], 3–4.
Odrodzenie 1947, No. 7, 16 II, Jan M. Nowak, *Życie w USA. Od specjalnego wysłannika „Odrodzenia”* [Life in the USA. From the *Odrodzenie* Special Correspondent], 9.
Odrodzenie 1947, No. 11, 16 III, Jan M. Nowak, *Życie w USA. Od specjalnego wysłannika „Odrodzenia,”* 5.
Odrodzenie 1947, No. 21, 26 V, Jan M. Nowak, *Życie w USA. Od specjalnego wysłannika „Odrodzenia,”* 5.
Odrodzenie 1947, No. 31, 3 VIII, Jan M. Nowak, *Życie w USA. Od specjalnego wysłannika „Odrodzenia,”* 1.
Odrodzenie 1947, No. 46, 16 XI, Jan M. Nowak, *Życie w USA. Od specjalnego wysłannika „Odrodzenia,”* 4.
Odrodzenie 1947, No. 48, 30 XI, Jan M. Nowak, *Życie w USA. Od specjalnego wysłannika „Odrodzenia,”* 1.
Odrodzenie 1948, No. 39, 26 XI, Żagarysta, *Henry Miller czyli dno* [Henry Miller or: The Lower Depths], 1–2.
Przekrój [Cross-section] 1945, No. 18, 12–18 VIII, *Sztuka dla wszystkich* [Art for Everyone], 5.
Przekrój 1946, No. 79, 13–19 X, *Notatnik nowojorski* [New York Notes], 10–11.
Twórczość [Creativity] 1948, No. 5, *Wprowadzenie w Amerykanów* [Introduction to Americans], 10–37.

Other sources

- Judt, T. 2008. *Powojnie. Historia Europy od roku 1945* [Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945]. Poznań: Rebis.
 Miłosz, C. 1981. *Wańkowicz i Miłosz w świetle korespondencji* [Wańkowicz and Miłosz in the Light of their Letters], *Twórczość* 10, 91–123.
 ——— 1995. *The Year of the Hunter*. Trans. Madeline G. Levine. Kraków: Noonday Press.
 ——— 1999. *Kontynenty* [Continents], Kraków: Znak.

- 2002 (Editing, translation, foreword). *Kultura masowa* [Mass Culture]. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie.
- 2007. *Zaraz po wojnie. Korespondencja z pisarzami 1945–1950* [Right After the War. Letters to Writers 1945–1950], Kraków: Znak.
- 2009. *Zniewolony umysł. Lekcja literatury z Czesławem Miłoszem i Włodzimierzem Boleckim* [The Captive Mind. Literature Class with Czesław Miłosz and Włodzimierz Bolecki], Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie.
- Pietych, P. 2011. *Aleksander Wat w Polsce powojennej (1946–1953). Teksty i konteksty* [Aleskander Wat in Post-war Poland (1946–1953). Texts and Contexts]. Kielce: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jana Kochanowskiego.

