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AMERICA – RUSSIA. MIŁOSZ’S PERSPECTIVE

Abstract: This article considers Russian themes in Miłosz’s writing, especially in his work written in the USA. The transoceanic perspective gave the Polish poet keen observations and insight into Russia; his opinions resulted from systematic and thorough studies. The article also discusses migration, exile and empires – issues central to Miłosz – by contrasting and comparing the Polish Nobel Prize winner and the Russian Joseph Brodsky.

Keywords: Czesław Miłosz, Joseph Brodsky, America, Russia, comparative analysis

Miłosz said in a letter to Joseph Brodsky of 12 August 1972: “What else can I tell you? The first months of exile are very hard. One shouldn’t take them as a measure of what is to come. You will see yourself that the **perspective** will change” (Grudzińska-Gross 2007: 19; my emphasis – M.W.). I quote this fragment of the correspondence for several reasons. First of all, Miłosz considered Brodsky an inhabitant of the *empirical kingdom* which constituted the space of encounter for poets of various nationalities and origins who had resisted the *iron grip of reality*, and who had done more for the Polish-Russian relations than many political alliances had. They made up, as the Polish Nobel Prize winner used to say, the fellowship of poets, an association of spiritual understanding and fate.¹

They were born in the East – Miłosz as a subject of the Tsar of the Russian empire (1911), Brodsky in the Soviet Union (1940). The impact of history on the poets’ biographies is evident, and the influence of Russian culture and tradition on their work seems indisputable. Both turned into free-thinking artists whose sovereignty was punished with exile. Miłosz

¹ Apart from Miłosz and Brodsky the above mentioned “fellowship of poets” was created by Tomas Venclova.

emigrated in 1951, Brodsky in 1972. Their exile led them to America, where they took up university posts and continued to write poetry, with a sense of loss, but also with new prospects.

Secondly, I refer to Brodsky because Miłosz spoke of his poems during his lectures on European poetry.² These poems were characteristic of Brodsky's poetics, style and world view, indicating his main areas of interest, but they also discussed issues which were important to Miłosz and which he was trying to handle and solve. The list starts with the crucial "Elegy to John Donne" (1963) followed by three religious poems: "A Stop in the Desert" (1966), "Offering in the Shrine" (1972), and "The Dominicans" (1971) from *Lithuanian Divertissement*, along with two poems on antiquity: "Odysseus to Telemachus" (1972) and "Torso" (1972). Miłosz also intended to discuss "1972" and "Lullaby of Cape Cod," poems dealing with the experience of emigration. All these poems are objects of reflection, present in many sketches and essays dedicated to his younger colleague. They also constitute a sphere of themes (classicism, religion, history, exile) which were important to Miłosz and present in his works. These are also the poems which Miłosz read very personally, such as "The Dominicans," a poem describing a church in Vilnius and expressing more than a nostalgic return to lost places. This poem, Miłosz says, becomes a space in which "poets of various nationalities and origin can celebrate their meeting" (Miłosz 1985: 51).

Thirdly, one notices a dialogic character in Brodsky's and Miłosz's works that indicates a close relationship between them; this is in addition to the dialogue which they held directly with each other (correspondence, public statements, Brodsky's interview with Miłosz). The Polish poet wrote several sketches on Brodsky (he only wrote more on Dostoyevsky), including "A Part of Speech," published in *The New York Review of Books* (1980). Miłosz was aware that the right reception and interpretation of the Russian poet's works in the West depended on this article. In her study *Miłosz i Brodski. Pole magnetyczne* (Miłosz and Brodsky: Magnetic Fields), Irena Grudzińska-Gross emphasises that the poets "consciously helped each other" (Grudzińska-Gross 2007: 98). It seems that for Miłosz,

² In Miłosz's archive in the Beinecke Library there is a list of authors and works he considered the most representative and significant in the 20th century. Among twelve poets mentioned there were three Russians: Anna Akhmatova, Osip Mandelstam and Joseph Brodsky. From the notes it is evident that Miłosz also considered Boris Pasternak, but in the end he was excluded from the literary canon.

Brodsky was an atypical Russian. Miłosz appreciated his individualism and inner independence which had kept him from becoming politically involved. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Brodsky was no dissident. Instead of commitment he displayed a *contemptuous sobriety* and arrogance, features which allowed him to survive the most difficult time. The Russian poet reinforced the sphere of existing things, instead of being drawn into the sphere of non-existence by ideologists. According to Miłosz, Brodsky knew that the lie of the system was too obvious, whereas the system of his country resembled a paper construction which would endure as long as one paid attention to it. In one of his poems he said: “Freedom/ Is when you forget the spelling of the tyrant’s name.”

He was not a political poet, because he did not want to get involved in polemics with an unworthy opponent. Instead he cultivated poetry as a special form of activity which was not subject to the immediate measures of time. (...) He and his St. Petersburg friends acted in the way Aleksander Wat had suggested for Russian literature, wishing that it would *separate from the enemy*. They wanted to be neither Soviet nor anti-Soviet; they wanted to be a-Soviet (Miłosz 1996: 279, 181; trans. A. M.).

He was also fundamentally unlike the Russian Diaspora; he had a view on emigration and the “new homeland” that was unlike most of his compatriots.’ Miłosz points out that the Russian poet “during the years of exile, from 1972 onwards, maintained a sceptical distance from the intellectual fashions of his new milieu. And at the same time, he does not at all resemble these recent Russian immigrants who stay in their Slavic shell, distrustful of the demonic West” (Miłosz 1985: 45). Brodsky had resigned from the autonomous life in order to conquer: through the poetic word he conquered America and the West. His poems on Mexico, Washington, London and Venice are images which – according to Miłosz – were inhabited by all of twentieth century civilisation. To support this view, Miłosz proposed the influence of St. Petersburg’s architecture. This is where the Russian poet’s strength lay: Brodsky, living in America, subdued the new reality and entered a dialogue with it. However, he never stopped being a Russian poet, the inheritor of the literary tradition who wished to merge with the history of the national culture, despite the destruction of history and politics. Therefore, he began where Akhmatova, Tsvetaeva, and Mandelstam left off; he built bridges to the works of his predecessors and paid tribute to them – great shadows – with every verse he wrote. And again,

on the margins of his notes, Miłosz questioned his compatriots' attitude to tradition: "Can we, like him, pay tribute to our predecessors? Or can we only be fussy and mordant? And why does the house of literature, whose strength used to be poetry, suddenly lack a niche for great poets?" (Miłosz 1996: 285).

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The above-mentioned letter, which marked the start of their friendship, and contained – according to Brodsky – a stern warning, says:

Certainly, you are in no position to do any work because you have to absorb many new impressions. It is a question of the internal rhythm and its friction with the rhythm of the life that surrounds you. But if what happened has happened, then it is better you came to America and did not stay in Western Europe, and not only from a practical point of view. I assume that you feel very uneasy, like all of us from our part of Europe who were brought up on the myths that the life of the writer ends once he has left his native land. But this myth is comprehensible only in those countries where civilisation remained rural for a long time, where the "soil" played a significant role. Everything depends on man and his internal well-being (Grudzińska-Gross 2007:19; trans. A.M.).

This theme of emigration is a fundamental question. The great issue of exile, disinheritance, alienation arises in Miłosz's every encounter with the works of the Russian poet. In some sense, Brodsky's works serve as a pretext for Miłosz to attempt to redefine his own experience of emigration and what it means. Both are heirs to a centuries-old tradition, which was created not only by their compatriots, as they see their own kinship with all whose patrons are Ovid and Dante. The former, let us recall, was condemned by Augustus to indefinite expulsion, to Tomis, on the Black Sea, where he wrote the *Tristia* collection of exile elegies; the latter had to leave Florence, never to return, as a result of the defeat of the Guelph association he had supported. He wrote *The Divine Comedy* in exile.³

³ Miłosz refers to the Florentine poet in his Nobel prize acceptance speech: "The patron of all the exiled poets, who visit their native land only in memory, is Dante, but how much has Florence grown since that time!" (Miłosz 2000: 171–184).

However, Grudzińska-Gross points out differences between Ovid and Dante, which could also be applied to the two twentieth-century poets. The critic chiefly focuses on their approaches to language:

Legend has it that in exile Ovid would write poems in the local language – Brodsky continued this tradition, although his exile was not nearly as dramatic as the Roman poet’s. As for Miłosz, he continued the tradition of Dante, who until the end of his days wrote in his own “dialect.” Miłosz had an utterly different approach to language than Brodsky. In one of his final texts he said: “Resistance to the poetry of another language should be considered a virtue. Marina Tsvetaeva remained a Russian poet until her death [Tsvetaeva wrote poems in French as well!], whereas Joseph Brodsky, who loved her poetry, was inclined to write his last poems in English, without much success... We are born in a specific place on Earth and we need to be faithful to this place and show moderation in how we adapt to foreign fashions” (Grudzińska-Gross 2007: 234; trans. A.M.).

There are many significant reflections here: these statements on the poetry and language of both poets seem to be worth consideration and thorough analysis. It is the philosophy of language that helps us interpret the exiled poet’s identity. Miłosz claimed that Brodsky burdened the language with too great a responsibility while erroneously ascribing a superior function to poetry. He also admitted that poetry and language are not devoid of limitations and that there is a disproportion⁴ between the world and language. The poets also have a different attitude to the profession. According to Miłosz, “a poet can only try to express something, that is all” (Miłosz 2011: 173). For Brodsky, on the other hand, language summons reality, defines an identity, and allows us to define ourselves. Grudzińska-Gross states that “Brodsky considered Russian his homeland, but he saw English as the language of freedom, and towards the end of his life he was ready to settle within it” (Grudzińska-Gross 2007: 233). Miłosz remained a Polish poet among foreigners. He avoided the ‘hermaphroditism’ of which he had accused Brodsky by persistently calling for fidelity to the speech and

⁴ The differences in approaches towards language and poetry are also discussed by Stanisław Balbus in his sketch “Śpiew Czasu” (The Song of Time); the scholar refers to Brodsky’s Nobel Prize speech in which he confessed that language is as addictive as alcohol or a drug – it dictates, suggests and leads. The scholar notes: “Brodsky intensifies what Miłosz resisted. Brodsky entrusts himself to language. He sustains the addiction. Not out of inertia. He simply believes deeply that ‘language knows better’. It knows better, as it embraces the whole of the cultural past and, to some extent, designs its future” (Fast [ed.] 1993: 87).

language of childhood. Importantly, however, Miłosz makes the following parenthetical reflection on the Russian poet:

I want to learn from thinking about Brodsky. Do we have the same attitude to our language as he does to Russian? That it is the greatest treasure, after the icon? Don't I rebel against the rustle and hiss of the Polish language, or even more against a "przez" (through) or a "przy" (by)? Yet, it is my country, my home and my glass coffin. Whatever I have done with it, it will only save me. The polemics, or perhaps debate over the creative craft prompt declarations and confessions (Miłosz 1996: 278; trans. A.M.).

In "Notes on Exile," published in *Book Abroad* (1976), the poet continues his reflections on the native language by constantly contrasting it with the foreign element of speech. He acknowledges the value of colliding two linguistic worlds, as it spurs the discovery of new aspects and tonalities of the native language, which can also acquire new contexts and meanings. An important function in the process of linguistic discoveries is played by memory, which facilitates philological reconstructions and returning to one's homeland, to childhood. This is the aim of our imagination, and as a result of these peregrinations Miłosz creates a "literature of longing." He constructs, in the initial period of emigration, oppositions between his world of origin and the world being acclimatised out of necessity; he emphasises their incompatibility, and so becomes a believer in the myth of exile. He is therefore a lonely, incomprehensible and alienated poet. "Gwiazda Piolun" (The Wormwood Star) contains a confirmation of this state: "and so my prayer came true, the prayer of the gymnasium student brought up on the great bards: my prayer for greatness - that is, exile" (Miłosz 1989a: 153).

Brodsky's essay, "The Condition We Call Exile" (1987),⁵ carries a completely different message and a confession from the author:

Another truth about exile is that, in a remarkable way, it hastens the professional rush – or drift – towards seclusion, to the perception of the absolute, to the condition in which man is alone with himself and language, when nothing and nobody separates him from them. From one day to the next exile shifts us to a place where we would normally arrive through our whole life. (...) For the writer, the condition we call exile is, above all, a linguistic experience (Brodsky 1996: 34; trans. A.M.).

⁵ This text was delivered at the Wheatland conference in Vienna, November 1987.

In her study *Josif Brodsky i Tomas Venclova wobec emigracji* (Joseph Brodsky and Tomas Venclova on Emigration) Beata Pawletko observes that the former poet attempts to dispel the mythology of exile: an emigrant is neither a victim nor a martyr, though he leaves his homeland, it is always a change from the worse to the better. The shadows emerging from the emigrant experience derive from the cult of martyrdom, alienation from compatriots who, in the new circumstances, become competitors and potential threats. Another problem of the émigré poet is the incompetent use of freedom of speech and, as a result, an excessive focus on the past. This type of retrospection constitutes, therefore, a form of defence. In the émigré environment, Pawletko claims, Brodsky’s views did not make him popular, as they touched a nerve with his compatriots. Yet, the poet’s line of thinking is more than logical: by accepting hospitality and help from another country, the least one needs to do is to grow fond of it, to express a basic sense of gratitude for the opportunities as well as new perspectives. According to Brodsky, the only acceptable place to live and work creatively is America – the embodiment of individualism.

Studying Miłosz’s and Brodsky’s émigré experiences and analysing their views on emigration, we ought to note the evolution of a world view, which is more conspicuous in the case of the Polish poet. Grudzińska-Gross says:

Miłosz, who at the start was a traditional exile, a loner isolated from his readers, chose to remain faithful to his native language and protested against the “host” language. Brodsky never took on the role of the exile, in an era of mass migration, global, underground and ethereal connections; the role of the exile had been exhausted. Miłosz was still an *exile*, whereas Brodsky was only an *immigrant* (Grudzińska-Gross 2007: 248; trans. A.M.).

The scholar ends her argument with a significant reflection: “Brodsky and Miłosz should be the patron saints of the émigré poets. Of those whose faces are not only turned towards the abandoned Florence, but who can also see a tree growing outside the window” (Grudzińska-Gross 2007: 249). This quote contains a suggestion of the metamorphosis occurring in Miłosz and is an inspiring contribution to reflections on the evolving perception of emigration and America. In this context, it is worth mentioning “Notes on Exile” once more: the poet rationally evaluates the status of the émigré, he is aware that despair, which is inseparably bound with the first stage of exile, can be reinterpreted. His inadequacies and fears – the loss

of name, the fear of defeat, moral torment – turn out to be the source of his suffering. The issue, Miłosz says, is not external circumstances. “On the other hand, he says further, the conditions of exile [force] the writer to see various perspectives, and they are necessary due to the symbolic transposition of reality” (Miłosz 1990: 47). Miłosz took up the challenge and in the 1970s he became “an American poet” who was accepted and – as far as possible – accepting.

Reading the two works that bear some similarities, i.e. Miłosz’s *Visions from San Francisco Bay* (1969) and Brodsky’s *Lullaby of Cape Cod* (1975), one notes different ways of assimilating the reality of emigration. Commenting on a poem by his Russian colleague in the aforementioned review of *Part of Speech*, Miłosz calls it *a great meditation on wandering* (Miłosz 1985: 47) and *a praise of perseverance* (Miłosz 1985: 46). Brodsky moves from one continent, from one hemisphere, from one empire to another, and the poem is a record of this peculiar translocation: from the difficult and painful departure from Leningrad (“I passed the green janissaries, my testes sensing their pole axe’s sinister cold”⁶) through the passage of unease and the unknown (“And then with the brine of sea-water sharpness filling, flooding the mouth, I crossed the line and sailed into mutt-ony clouds”) until his stay in the easternmost part of Massachusetts – Cape Cod, famous for the abundance of fish in the waters surrounding the cape. There the poet wrote the following words:

I write from an Empire whose enormous flanks
Extend beneath the sea. Having sampled two
Oceans as well as continents, I feel that I know
What the globe itself must feel: there’s nowhere to go. (...)

Miłosz is intrigued by this fragment, and by the word “empire,” which Brodsky often uses. Analysing this fragment of the poem, he explains the phenomenon of *Lullaby*’s author and opens up a wider cultural context:

“Empire” is one of Brodsky’s most slippery words. The Roman conquests are called neither “liberations” nor “anti-colonialism.” They were simply a demonstration of power. Similarly, when Charles the Great or Napoleon strove for power, this was not masked by an ideology. The twentieth century bore witness to a struggle between several centres of power, while Orwell’s doublespeak dispelled the smoke screen of blustering slogans. The Russians might see the

⁶ Brodsky’s *Lullaby of Cape Cod* translated by Anthony Hecht: <http://columbiajournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/CJ-Issue-4-Readable.pdf>. Accessed on 16 March 2012.

fact that their country is an empire as a source of pride, but for Americans, who have a strange habit of breast-beating, it is a source of shame; there is no escaping from reality. For Brodsky “empire” also implies the very size of the continents, the nature of the monumentality he loves (Miłosz 1985: 48; trans. A.M.).

The above words confirm that Brodsky is, above all, a poet of culture. He treats language and poetry in a total fashion. “Empire,” on the other hand, is an idea which expresses the state of mind or a symbol of a certain representation of the co-existence of an artist and the world. Perhaps the literal sizes of the countries where man has to live and write are meant to justify the poetic creation. In what sense is the poem discussed by Miłosz a tribute to perseverance? The Russian poet comes from one empire to conquer another. The challenge he takes up is less one of geography than culture. He assimilates the appropriated land with the word, which requires effort, pain and sacrifice. He does not relent in the face of adversity and succeeds. None of the Russian émigré poets had managed this before. None had managed to create his own land, a native land, a home out of a country of exile. Brodsky, says Miłosz, uses the metaphor of a fish which is thrown ashore and “bends itself to ‘some kind of cellular wish’ (...) wriggling toward the bushes and forming hinged leg-struts.” He ends his reflections on *Lullaby* with the following quote from the poem:

Yet just because shoes exist and the foot is shod
Some surface will always be there, some place to stand,
A portion of dry land.⁷

“Some place to stand” expresses the notion of expansion (mental? spiritual? linguistic?), the need to feel rooted wherever one is. On the other hand, in *Visions from San Francisco Bay*, we read: “starting from the place where I am: the ground, instead of being a firm and solid base, is shifting under my feet” (Miłosz 1989c: 28). And further – “an individual establishes his identity through the physical, by relating himself to the objects in view and within reach, by expanding what he has acquired onto a village, a district, a country, then onto the past of the country which has to be somehow accessible and hooked onto a detail, otherwise he would be ‘nowhere’” (Miłosz 1989c: 189–190). Both works provide an account of the first years in America; at the same time, they are a first attempt to over-

⁷ Brodsky’s *Lullaby of Cape Cod* translated by Anthony Hecht: <http://columbiajournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/CJ-Issue-4-Readable.pdf>, p. 44. Accessed on 16 March 2012.

come inner resistance to the new reality. Brodsky has a broad perspective and looks at the world globally, whereas Miłosz persistently looks for an anchor and a reference point.

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Let us recall that the beginnings of exile were accompanied by different historical and cultural circumstances. Miłosz made the decision to stay in the West when many intellectual circles (especially in France) were fascinated by Stalin and his rule. The Cold War, which divided the world and its spheres of influence, had been underway for only a few years. The poet's decision stirred controversy, and not only in Poland and émigré circles; Western public opinion sometimes treated Miłosz with reserve as well. In 1953 Miłosz published two important books: *The Captive Mind* and *The Seizure of Power*, which for many years determined the reception of his works in the West, especially in America. The history of the reception of Miłosz's work is recounted by Zbigniew Folejewski in the article *Czesław Miłosz: A Poet's Road to Ithaca between Worlds, Wars, and Poetics*.⁸ Interestingly, American critics recognised the analogy between Miłosz's situation and the "case" of the Russian poet, Boris Pasternak:

Just as Pasternak – Folejewski says – is less famous in the West for his poetry than for his novel *Doctor Zhivago*, so the name of Miłosz was mostly associated with *Zniewolony Umysł* (The Captive Mind) and *Zdobycie władzy* (The Seizure of Power). Yet in both cases, the works that made the writers famous, although important intellectually, do not reflect the highest artistic values of their *oeuvre*, which is chiefly contained in their poetry (Karwowska 2000: 28; trans. A.M.).

The comparison between the two poets gains significance in the context of Miłosz's later sketches on Pasternak. Critics' statements may have prompted the Polish Nobel laureate to question Western public opinion on the Russian reality and Pasternak's works. At the same time, in discussing the case of the Russian poet, Miłosz took on a more universal project, as he was trying to elucidate the misunderstanding caused by the lack of knowledge in influential American circles.

⁸ Cf.: Karwowska 2000: 27–28. The author of the study claims that this text was the first extensive sketch dedicated to Miłosz. It was published in *Books Abroad* in 1963.

Miłosz was justified in feeling the victim of assumptions based on the false premises. In one of the sketches, and also in the interview with Brodsky, he admits his youthful fascination for Pasternak and the *Second Birth* collection of poems; yet he explains that it was only when living as an émigré in America that he understood the real meaning of the collection. These poems were in praise of Marxism and the title implied a rebirth into Marxist truth. Pasternak’s history requires deeper consideration, as it is inseparably connected with Soviet reality. Miłosz is aware of this and clarifies the reality, or the situation of the poet, his choices in “another” world, but the mode of narration also suggests a personal dimension of reflection. In his essay “On Pasternak Soberly” of 1963⁹ he wrote:

He always emphasised the unity of his oeuvre, but now this unity has been annihilated by the circumstances. In Russia he faced a stream of abuse for writing a book nobody would read. In the West, on the other hand, he was endlessly praised for a novel distinct from the rest of his life’s work – Pasternak’s poetry is practically untranslatable. Nobody wants to become a symbol, whether he is perceived as a courageous knight or a monster, as this means that he is not assessed for what he considers his achievement, but he is made a target of forces which are fundamentally alien to his will. One might say that in the last years of his life Pasternak lost the right to his own personality, while his name came to define a certain affair (Miłosz 2004: 125–126; trans. A.M.).

The ambiguity of the Russian poet’s situation also applies – though obviously to a lesser degree – to Miłosz. The sketch was written in special circumstances: five years after the scandal caused by awarding Pasternak the Nobel Prize. The publication of the novel abroad and the political dimension of the award spurred the authorities’ attack, a witch-hunt and the threat of exile. The poet never left his country, as this would have equalled death from his point of view. He died three years later. In the West *Doctor Zhivago* was considered, against the author’s intentions, denunciatory and anti-establishment. Miłosz did not share the enthusiasm for the novel, but he also understood perfectly well that it had not been thoroughly analysed by the Western scholars. For him, Pasternak’s case had an aftertaste of bitterness and irony. He said he returned to this subject *without hesitation*, and adopted an emotional tone in the article *O współczesnej literaturze*

⁹ The sketch was published for the first time in 1970 in *Books Abroad*, and then republished in the first collection of Miłosz’s essays to be published in America, *Emperor of the Earth* (1977). Significantly, this volume contained many sketches on the Russian literature and thought.

rosyjskiej i Zachodzie (On Contemporary Russian Literature and the West) (1977). Miłosz levelled an accusation not only against the literary critics, but against the Western world as a whole. He pointed out the different understanding of words in Russia and America, and as such, the different directions in which the countries were going: “the works of Pasternak and Solzhenitsyn restore a hierarchy of values which cannot be rejected without tempting madness, they ‘judge,’ in a sense, the whole of contemporary literature, drawing a clear line between what seems serious in human life to people ‘the prosperity swells people’s heads’” (Miłosz 1989c: 155). Somewhere on the margins of these Russian books, Miłosz defines his point of view: he chooses tradition, he defends Slavic writers (including himself) and, as Brodsky emphasised, shows solicitude for a future threatened by relativism and nihilism.

At this point I would like to mention the fourth and perhaps most important point connecting Miłosz and Brodsky – a fascination for the Russian thinker Lev Shestov. In America Miłosz met many Russians, he read and studied Russian literature, and he wrote on the phenomenon of Russia. Many of these attempts went out to the Western reader; the poet took up the very difficult task of explaining the cultural codes. In his entire *oeuvre* one finds comparative, contrastive and mediatory efforts; there are many references and allusions to the Russian mindset and culture. It seems, however, that Miłosz saw studying Russian religious thought as a most important inspiration and spiritual need. The poet held many writers in high esteem; apart from Dostoyevsky, these included Vladimir Solovyov, Sergei Bulgakov and Vasilij Rozanov. He polemicized with Nikolai Berdyaev and Vissarion Belinsky, but Shestov was the thinker who was particularly dear to him.

Miłosz devoted a separate essay to the thinker, giving it a suggestive title *Shestov, or: The Purity of Despair*.¹⁰ Shestov was a philosopher who emigrated from Russia and died in exile in Paris, writing his best works in the foreign land – a lover of paradoxes, both despairing and pious. He argued against stoicism, which he saw as the essence of succumbing to necessity. He juxtaposed Athens with Jerusalem, Socrates and Plato with *The*

¹⁰ The essay was first published in *Emperor of the Earth*, 1977.

Book of Job (NB Brodsky called Miłosz a Job who screams not of his own tragedy, but of the tragedy of existence itself). He challenged a God who knows no limits, who is not necessarily love, who randomly and perhaps haphazardly dispenses with human fate. Despite his doubts, Shestov believed that the world was sacred. God was impenetrable, full of contradictions, but man had no other solution than faith. The philosopher’s despair was founded on this conviction. Despite his classical moderation and attachment to tradition, Brodsky was also a poet of despair, Miłosz claimed, and one who moved between the contradictions: he broke the aporia of reality and strove for transcendence. Both Brodsky and Miłosz respected the Russian thinker and became heirs to his ideas. Despair was not foreign to Miłosz. It is telling that the poet found the antidote to powerlessness and pain of existence in Eastern spirituality and in Russian religious radicalism.

Miłosz’s attitude to Russia is ambivalent. He liked to say: “I like the Russians, but I do not like Russia or my perspective is very much like that of the Russian philosophers. I am very sorry, but I am not a Russophile” (Fiut 1981:86). Many such statements can be found in his speeches and texts. On the other hand, a letter from Zbigniew Herbert of 1966 is intriguing: “If there is one thing I cannot stand about you, it is your fascination with Russia, which for me is a great shitty steppe with a few prophets” (Herbert, Miłosz 2006: 60).¹¹ The contradictions in the poet’s views on Russia are perhaps the most puzzling feature of his *oeuvre*. Miłosz certainly did not perceive Russia stereotypically, but he left a great deal unsaid, encouraging reflection and provoking discussion. In a letter of 1960 to Merton he wrote: “Nobody in the West knows what Russia is – only a few Russians and a few Poles know” (Merton, Miłosz 2003: 77). Did Miłosz find the right context for understanding “the Russian sphinx” in America, a place that provided distance and constituted a reference point (a kind of a mirror)? Per-Arne Bodin, author of *Miłosz and Russia from a Swedish Perspective*, believes that Miłosz “used the image of Russia to describe himself, his religious search, epiphanies, dualism and his own beliefs and anti-utopian ideas. The

¹¹ Herbert’s attitude to Russia changed (at least to a certain degree) due to Brodsky. The poets had a mutual respect and a fondness for each other.

image of Russia became a part of the poet's biography" (Bodin 1997: 23). The crucial part of this image is certainly the relationship between Miłosz and Brodsky. And the words the Polish poet used describe the works of his younger colleague also apply to his own poems. Undoubtedly, Miłosz's poetry can be called a great meditation on wandering, and on man, a praise of perseverance and faithfulness to tradition. To conclude, it is worth quoting Tomas Venclova's pertinent and beautiful words, which contain everything that was most important in the poets' friendship: "Miłosz was, for Brodsky, one of few role models, equal to Akhmatova and Auden. Yet, the older poet also looked to the younger one with admiration and drew encouragement from the fact of his existence" (Venclova 2007: 9).

trans. Agata Maslowska

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