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A Variety of Encounters: Czesław Miłosz and Tomas Venclova

There was a danger that they might have never crossed paths in person, though born in the same land and only a short distance apart. They were separated by many other factors: a different generation, a different cultural-linguistic context, and a different historical experience. But in one important thing they were brothers: like their predecessor Adam Mickiewicz, they were captives in their native lands. Czesław Miłosz came into the world in 1911, in the manor house of his grandfathers in Szetejnie (Šeteniai), as a subject to a Russian Tsar. Tomas Venclova was born in 1937 in Klaipėda in the independent Lithuanian state, but spent his formative years as a citizen of the Soviet Union.

Both poets walked an old Romantic path, already trod by the exile Mickiewicz: after their studies in Vilnius they departed to teach Slavic literature at universities abroad. But their meeting in cruel and un-romantic times did not merely take place in the sphere of imagination, but in concrete reality. Miłosz and Venclova met and became close friends in the distant United States, and there from different backgrounds they came to endorse very similar views. They both resolutely opposed the excesses of Soviet totalitarianism and Russian imperialism, but also, more broadly, all forms of nationalism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism. Both embraced critical patriotism, demanding both pride in the cultural achievements of their peoples, as well as courageous, open, and honest engagement with the dark, painful, and often embarrassing failures of their respective national histories. In all of their writings and their public activities, these two men showed that Polish-Lithuanian relations can be harmonious, and need not be bound by prejudices, crossfire of accusations, or unilateral interpretations of their overlapping history, but rather that they must be built on mutual respect for diversity, cooperation, and friendship. Numerous examples of their harmonious cooperation can be found in Barbara Toruńczyk's

book *Czesław Miłosz, Tomas Venclova Powroty do Litwy*¹ (*Czesław Miłosz, Tomas Venclova: Returns to Lithuania*), showing these two friends actively working firstly for the independence of Lithuania from the Soviet Union, and secondly for Polish-Lithuanian rapprochement. For them, the grand old tradition of the multicultural Grand Duchy of Lithuania was a kind of myth, but it was one which could also serve as a blueprint for current and future tolerance between different cultures and a working symbiosis of nations and ethnic groups living side by side on the same land. Thus, they denounced national identity, when narrowly understood, or based only on linguistic criterion, as a delusional error with terrible consequences, leading only to blind prejudice, conflict, and mutual isolation.

Likewise, both of these decidedly anti-Soviet writers took great pains to avoid falling into Russophobia. On the contrary, Russian literature and culture aroused their genuine admiration. Miłosz wrote, for example, about Aleksandr Pushkin, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Osip Mandelstam, Boris Pasternak, Andrei Sinyavsky, and Josif Brodsky. And Miłosz was especially fascinated by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, about whom he wrote almost an entire book, as well as the two remarkable Russian religious thinkers, Lev Shestov and Vladimir Solovyov.

Venclova, on the other hand, was more interested in Russian poetry. As he later recalled, he read Vladimir Mayakovsky's youthful poems, while still in high school, as well as Sergei Yesenin, Aleksandr Blok, and Anna Akhmatova. He translated Akhmatova's works and analysed them extensively in his literary criticism. After winning her kind cooperation, he met with her many times in Moscow and Leningrad. Venclova was also the author of studies about other Russian authors dear to his heart, such as Marina Tsvetaeva, Andrei Voznesensky, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn.

In turn, Polish readers came to know Venclova as a poet thanks to the translations of Stanisław Barańczak, Czesław Miłosz, and Beata Kalęba, as well as Venclova's academic studies of Aleksander Wat's works (*Aleksander Wat. Obrazoburca*, 1997), a 2006 Polish translation of his book *Opisać Wilno* (Lithuanian title: *Vilnius: miestas Europoje*), and several collections of essays on literary and journalistic prose. He has recently published (2015), along with Leonidas Don-

1 *Czesław Miłosz, Tomas Venclova Powroty do Litwy* wybrała, opracowała i ułożyła w tom Barbara Toruńczyk, Warszawa, Fundacja Zeszyty Literackie, 2011. Hereafter on quoting from this book the abbreviation PDL and the page number are given in brackets.

skis, a Polish language version of a book under the distinguished title: *Seeking Optimism in an Era of Pessimism. Eastern Europe – Premonitions and Predictions*.

And so in a sense, they had met very many times: in different times, in different places, and in multiple intellectual spaces. Many of those meetings – perhaps the most important of their encounters – took place within their texts. It is a true fact, which has passed into literary legend that Venclova read Miłosz’s *Native Realm* (published in Paris in 1959) page by page, as they were separately smuggled in letters sent to Vilnius, bypassing Soviet censorship. As he later recalled, Venclova found himself reading this book in some of the very places Miłosz had described from exile.

Miłosz, in turn, heard about Venclova from Josif Brodsky. In a letter to Jerzy Giedroyc on 10 December 1972, Miłosz wrote that according to Brodsky, “the best young poet in the Soviets is Tomas Venclova – I am trying to get his poems and maybe translate a couple” (PDL, 129). And he kept that literary rendezvous. He acquired a photocopy of a volume of Venclova’s poem entitled *Kalbos ženklas (A Sign of Speech)* and a literal translation prepared by his colleague at Berkeley, and translated one of the poems in this volume (*Pašnekesys žiemą*) into Polish as *Rozmowa w zimie* (2001). In a commentary to this poem, he confesses, “We became good friends with Tomas when he came to Berkeley, and I was grateful to Josif for this new acquaintance. This is how in America our triumvirate of poets, Russian-Lithuanian-Polish, was formed, perhaps as a promise of times when the friendship between our nations will not be the parody that it is today.” (PDL 17)

Venclova did not leave his debt to Miłosz unpaid. He translated into Lithuanian Miłosz’s poems *Campo di Fiori*, *Mittelbergheim*, and *Filologia* (dedicated to the memory of the Lithuanian religious writer and linguist, Konstantinas Sirvydas) as well as his cycle of poems, *Lithuania: After Fifty-Two Years*. Venclova also took his friend Miłosz as a subject of his poetry on his 90th birthday in a poem entitled *Encomium Insulae*. In many of his essays, he analysed Miłosz’s poetry. He even found the topic of the difficulties faced when translating the Nobel laureate’s work to be worth the extensive discussion in his essay *The Translator’s Self-Critique*, which is itself, in fact, an excellent interpretation of Miłosz’s poem *Który skrzywdził* (*You Who Wronged*).

And yet, in contrast to Venclova’s extensive discussion of Miłosz’s Polish-language verses, Miłosz was not as quick to comment on Venclova’s Lithuanian

poetry, probably because of his poor knowledge of the Lithuanian language. However, he extolled Venclova and the friendship, which bound them in two very important poems.

First, in “The Wormwood Star” in the cycle of “The Separate Notebook” in the volume *Hymn of the Pearl* (1981):

When Thomas brought news that the house I was born in no longer exists,
 Neither the lane nor the park sloping to the river, nothing,
 I had a dream of return. Multicolored. Joyous. I was able to fly.
 And the trees were even higher than in childhood, because they had been
 growing during all the years since they had been cut down.
 The loss of native province, of a homeland,
 Wondering one’s whole life among foreign tribes –
 Even this
 Is only romantic, i.e., bearable.²

Note that Venclova’s name appears in the poem, in which the material obliteration inflicted by a totalitarian state is contrasted against the personal memory of a small homeland. Although the physical site of the Szetejnie manor house and its surrounding park were razed to the ground by the Soviets in the 1950s, they remained unharmed in Miłosz’s mind and imagination. In spite of all the power of a historical iniquity, they remain forever preserved in the poetic word. Taking flight in a dream, which is also a flight of the imagination, the poet invalidates the passage of time and the destructive power of history. In spite of what has happened, he can still return to his native ancestral land, which is otherwise inaccessible to him in two dimensions: in time because their familiar form has now been altered beyond recognition, but also in terms of the vast oceanic physical space between him and Lithuania, and which, as an exile, he cannot cross for political reasons. Just like his friend Venclova, who plays a key symbolic role in the poem, Miłosz could only return to that geographical location in person, when Lithuania finally regained its independence.

2 Czesław Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems 1931–2001*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001, p. 385. Hereafter quoting from this book the abbreviation NCP and the page number are given in brackets.

And here we see that far from their homes these poets built themselves a vital community of place and fate. The community of place can be found in both their shared place of birth, that is, the relinquished Lithuanian homeland, but also the shared place of exile. The community of fate can be seen in their shared experience of escape from the communist totalitarian state and exile in a foreign land. But Miłosz, not for the first time, in this poem significantly undercuts the nostalgic model of Romantic poetry about exile. He writes that exile from the homeland does not have to become a languishing curse. His longing for ancestral land does not lead to paralysis of his poetic speech, nor does it force him into dull repetition of threadbare Romantic clichés. For the exiled poet's ultimate fate – regardless of the environment in which he finds himself – is simply being isolated and cut off. And this is life which is, as he writes with a touch of irony, “only romantic, i.e., bearable.”

Miłosz also recalls the figure of his Lithuanian friend in the poem *At Yale* (NCP, 516), which begins in a meaningful way:

We were drinking vodka together, Brodsky, Venclova
 With his beautiful Swedish girl, myself, Richard,
 Near the Art Gallery, at the end of the century
 Which woke up as if from a heavy slumber
 And asked, in stupefaction: “What was that?
 How could we? A conjunction of planets?
 Or spots on the sun?”

Other close friends are apparently involved in this dialogue, but their voices in the poem remain anonymous. It is difficult to know who is speaking at any moment, and it cannot be excluded that they speak only in the mind of the author himself, who is asking fundamental questions, and only partially answering them. So what is this conversation about? It is certainly full of hesitation and reservations, trying to summarize and evaluate what happened in the twentieth century “during the break” – after the times of war, occupation and the power of totalitarian systems. And here a characteristic feature: the conversation – whether it is real or fictional – silently passes over the horrors of historical experience, the death camps and the Gulag, the deprivation of dignity and the extinction of millions of human lives. Why? Because, as the poet says, “For

history / Is no more comprehensible. Our species / Is not ruled by any reasonable law [...] Thus mankind returns to its beloved pastimes. / During the break.” The edifices of Hegel’s and Marx’s conceptions of history were demolished and when the smoke had cleared, the “end of history” was announced.

So what does remain? One answer is a massconsumption twentieth-century version of hedonism, concerned only with the outward edges of the human body, its physical state, health, appearance, and pleasure. The dogmas of the twentieth-century religion of the body are proclaimed by current fashion, business, and commerce. We find, among other things, “Recipes for perfect sex, rules / Lowering cholesterol, methods / Of losing weight.” Another leftover is the cult of art. The looming shadow of the poem’s Art Gallery asks us to think of the replacement of religion by the idolatry of art, churches by the galleries of paintings, and the saints by the worship of artistic masters.

We find Venclova’s answer to this, as well as tribute to Miłosz himself, in his *Encomium Insulae*. Following Wystan Hugh Auden, who in his *Letter to Lord Byron* used the verses of *Don Juan* as a point of departure, Brodsky paid tribute to Auden himself in *York: Elegy to W.H. Auden*. And Brodsky’s *Verses on the Death of T.S. Eliot* is very closely modelled on Auden’s poem *In Memory of W.B. Yeats*. Venclova, following this distinguished precedent, in his poem dedicated to Miłosz, appealed directly to some of the works of the Nobel Prize laureate. Especially, it seems, to the poem *With Trumpets and Zithers*. The very juxtaposition and choice of literary form tells us that the meeting and dialogue between the Lithuanian poet and the Polish poet takes place in the space of a distinct literary tradition: Anglo-Saxon classicism and its Polish and Lithuanian continuation. The most important are: the living presence of European culture, the freedom to travel throughout the sphere of symbols of Mediterranean civilization, and the references to a shared cultural code. In their peregrinations through historical, cultural and sacred spaces, there are no restrictions. In Miłosz’s poem, the poet experiences a kind of clairvoyance: “All past wars in the flesh, all loves, conch shells of the Celts, Norman boats by the cliffs.” (NCP, 225) In Venclova’s verse we can hear its echo “The ships still sail to Apulia and Holmgardr.” Through these almost touchable and expressive scenes, through bodily epiphanies and linked chains of metonymies, emerges something, which is difficult to imagine and capture: the Whole.

Not long after Miłosz’s death in 2014, a new danger appeared to emerge in Europe, one which he had darkly felt and feared on the horizon: a returning

wave of nationalism and Russian longing for its old empire. Venclova's poem *Caligula at the Gates* (*Kaligula prie varty*, 2014) was written during this period. It was pointedly read out loud in Polish translation by the poet in a speech on the topic of dissidents during the second edition of the Days of Remembrance for Natalya Gorbanevskaya in Wrocław in November 2015. Venclova's twenty-first century verses sound like a terrible echo and unlooked-for counterpoint to Miłosz's own *At Yale*, written decades ago, at the moment when the Soviet bloc was crumbling.

Our respite was short-lived in the end.
 But after long hardships it had seemed
 It would never draw to a close. Friends
 Invoked poetry and feasted in gardens,
 [...]

We ridiculed the words of the prophets
 But, agelessly, they proved to be true:

The room is besieged by clashing steel,
 The heavens darken; the sea's forces rage.
 Blow out the candles and close the gates.
 Beyond them – Caligula and the plague.³

(Translated from Lithuanian by Ellen Hinsey, 2014)

Translated from Polish by Scott Simpson

3 Quoted from: www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/caligula-at-the-gates-by-tomas-venclova-1.2044233 [accessed August 23 2018].