Abstract

As critics, Czesław Miłosz, Milan Kundera, and Joseph Brodsky sought to shape Western perceptions of their native literatures, the very traditions from which they had been excluded as Cold War exiles. This dissertation observes that a pervasive theme in their criticism is the way in which each respective literature (Polish, Czech, Russian) has coped with the disorientations of the modern era.

Chapter 1 proposes that, for Czesław Miłosz, the particular historical problems confronting Poland in the middle of the twentieth century signify a broader civilizational problem confronting humanity in the modern era: having voluntarily surrendered his sovereignty to both Nature and History, man has made himself a slave to the necessity that appears to be at work in both. Chapter 2 claims that Milan Kundera’s central polemic aim—from his earliest essays in the Marxist literary press to his efforts on behalf of suppressed colleagues while in emigration—was always to rescue Czech literature from its own smallness; to prevent it from disappearing into provincialism and irrelevance in the broader European context, as writers inevitably wrestled with the political and cultural distractions of a century that offered little peace. Finally, Chapter 3 considers Joseph Brodsky’s assertion that literature’s purpose is “to save the next man, a new arrival, from falling into an old trap,” and it argues that we may regard his criticism as a history of how Russian writers have responded to that imperative.
Acknowledgments

This dissertation could not have been written without the guidance and limitless kindness of my dissertation adviser Irena Gross; the wisdom and generosity of Caryl Emerson; Michael Wachtel’s friendship and his comments as colloquium adviser; the forbearance of the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures; Kate Fischer’s energy and efficiency; the chapter comments of the members of the dissertation colloquium; the Writing Center’s Dissertation Boot Camp; the kind advice of Masaryk University’s Professor Petr Kyloušek; the sustained and careful attention of my readers Jessie Labov, Jim Tonn, Christine Dunbar, and Blue Montakhab; the assistance of Monika Jirglová, Bohdana Frantíková, Fred Misurella, Jozef Muller, and Miroslav Balaštík; the fire started by my friends years ago in the Telčský lingvistický kroužek; and the encouragement of my parents. Most of all, Tessie, I thank you for your enduring patience. Your turn.
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Czeslaw Milosz, Milan Kundera, Joseph Brodsky, and the Task of the Émigré Critic

If a great people doesn’t believe that the truth is only to be found in itself alone (in itself alone and in it exclusively); if it doesn’t believe that it alone is fit and destined to raise up and save all the rest by its truth, it would at once sink into being ethnographical material and not a great people.¹

F. M. Dostoevsky

Introduction

Of the many writers who chose or were forced to leave the Soviet Union and its satellites during the Cold War, Czesław Milosz, Milan Kundera, and Joseph Brodsky are among those most read by non-native readers. This is largely due to the decision of each author to address a Western readership directly through popular criticism on subjects covering a broad range of cultural and political themes. Although they all became full participants in the literary cultures of their adopted homes, each also wrote about his native literature, producing translations, histories, anthologies and criticism, and supporting the work of colleagues suffering persecution. This activity assisted in raising the profiles and shaping Western perceptions of Central and East European literatures rendered strange and suspect by political events in the twentieth century. In the process, each author assumed the related task of transmitting historical lessons learned during the last century in his part of Europe, convinced that his experience enabled him “to pose more fundamental questions, to create more meaningful myths than can those who haven’t experienced such an anabasis.”²

² “...klást možná podstatnější otázky, vytvářet možná smysluplnější mýty než těm, kteří celou tuto politickou anabazi neprožili.” Milan Kundera qtd. in Antonín J. Liehm, Generace (Cologne, 1988), p.63. All translations mine unless otherwise noted.
A basic task of the poets and linguists who shaped the “young” European literatures of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was that of creating modern literary cultures. For many poets, such as the Czech Josef Jungmann and the Russian Vasily Zhukovsky, this meant opening windows to ancient and modern literatures by translating essential works into the target languages. In his book about Zhukovsky’s work as a translator, critic, and educator, Ilya Vinitsky compares the Russian poet to the Interpreter in John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*: “As Bunyan’s Pilgrim could not avoid the Interpreter’s house as he set out on his journey, scholars of nineteenth-century Russian literature cannot pass by ‘the house of Zhukovsky,’ for it too represents the start of a long journey, as well as the key to the most important movements and depositories of ideas.”³ The same might be said about the importance of Miłosz, Kundera, and Brodsky to the reception of their respective native literatures by Western readers following more than a century of modern development and decades of politically induced estrangement. Before we can properly study that reception, it is necessary to investigate the nature and the specific content of that interpretive work itself—a task that has yet to be undertaken—and that is the task of this dissertation.

A considerable amount of the scholarship previously devoted to these writers concerns movement across linguistic and cultural borders and other questions related to emigration, including problems of translation, the authors’ depictions of their homelands, influence on (and of) their Western peers, and reception of their own work at home and abroad. Other relevant work has compared the rhetoric of Kundera and Miłosz with respect to their evolving identities as Central Europeans. Aron Aji’s collection of critical essays stands out for its readings of

Kundera from within the context of his Czech predecessors, an approach rarely encountered outside Czech criticism.¹ Irena Grudzińska Gross’s monograph on Brodsky and Miłosz provides a comprehensive background for comparison of their interpretive work by closely examining their friendship, their disagreements, and the particular dedication of each to “the estate of poetry.”² Bożena Karwowska has discussed Miłosz and Brodsky reception among Anglophone readers within the broader context of the reception of East European poetry.³

In short, a good deal has been written by Slavists and comparatists alike on the original poetry and fiction of the three authors and on its relation to the work of others within and without its own sundry linguistic, geographic, and cultural contexts, employing everything from formalist analysis to translation theory to post-colonial theory. Yet virtually no attention has been given by a Slavist—that is, by one equipped to understand the context out of which each writer emerges and that he is deemed to represent—to the writer’s role as emissary of his respective local “freemasonic lodge,” to borrow Miłosz’s metaphor.⁴ To be sure, Kundera would likely object to this dissertation as reflecting the prejudices of the specialist, whose need to demonstrate his expertise requires that he imprison a work of art in its native context to the detriment of “the large context of world literature, the only approach that can bring out its aesthetic value.”⁵

Bearing such perils in mind, I hope it will provide a useful tool for the study of the foreign reception of Russian, Polish, and Czech literature during and immediately following the Cold War.

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⁴ “Poets of each country resemble an eighteenth-century freemasonic lodge, with its rites, rivalries, and friendships. Being a member of such a lodge myself, I am glad to act as its representative abroad.” Czeslaw Milosz (selected & ed.), *Postwar Polish Poetry*, 1965. 3rd, expanded ed. (Berkeley, 1983) xiii.
Given the very different ways in which the three writers have chosen to engage their Western readers and the varied range of sources that are consequently available for each, the study of each one called for its own method of gathering relevant materials. Miłosz was by far the most prolific prose writer of the three, providing the most replete body of texts from which to draw, and his *History of Polish Literature* is naturally central to such a study. Brodsky’s ample attention to Russian authors, which is largely fixed on a constellation of twentieth-century poets, is sometimes highly concentrated but is just as often woven into themes that concern more global topics. His essays on Akhmatova and Tsvetaeva in *Less than One* formed a natural lodestone. Kundera has written the least criticism of the three and he devotes the least attention to directly commenting on his native literary tradition, even if we include his very disquisitive fiction. For this reason I have permitted myself to use material from his novels, which overlap generically and thematically with his non-fiction.

At the heart of this study, however, are those prose texts that are identifiably conceived for a Western audience, either because they were originally written in English or French or because the author or editor explicitly states that this is the case. For Miłosz and Brodsky this included, for example, introductions to anthologies devoted to translated Russian and Polish poetry. For Brodsky and Kundera, essays published in periodicals such as *The New Yorker* and *The New York Review of Books* (and often collected later in books) were crucial. *Cross Currents*, a journal of Central European culture published by the University of Michigan from 1983 to 1992, provided a number of important texts by Kundera and Miłosz. Texts that plainly were not written for the Western reader have been used to support our understanding of those that were.

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9 *Cross Currents: A Yearbook of Central European Culture*, founded by Ladislav Matejka and Benjamin Stoltz, contributed to the revival of the notion of Central Europe in the 1980s and 1990s and was an important forum for writers who were prohibited from publishing at home. Miłosz, Kundera, and Brodsky all published in *Cross Currents* at one time or another. See Jessie Labov, “Reinventing Central Europe: Cross-Currents and the Émigré Writer in the 1980s,” Diss. New York University (2004).
This includes, perhaps most conspicuously, Kundera’s 1962 monograph on Vladislav Vančura which, while intended for native specialists and saturated with the political jargon of the day, offers a prolonged view of the author grappling with a figure he continues to regard as one of the most important Czech novelists. Lying somewhere in the middle are those texts for which the author’s intention is ambiguous. Edward Możejko reminds us that most Poles were “taken unawares” by Miłosz’s Nobel Prize, a circumstance that underscores the ambiguous profile of his intended readership twenty-seven years after the publication of *The Captive Mind*.10

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The first chapter of the dissertation, which is devoted to Czesław Miłosz (1911-2004), approaches Polish literature indirectly. Here I propose that, for Miłosz, the modern struggle of the Poles for self-determination and man’s perpetual struggle against nature are two aspects of a single larger struggle against necessity. I begin by exploring Miłosz’s anxiety over the notion of universal necessity and over modern science’s conception of man as the product of random deterministic forces. This anxiety is most conspicuous in his viscerally antagonistic response to nature, which is deepened by his experience as a European in America, a “civilization which to its members appears to be Nature itself.”11 The chapter’s second half focuses on Miłosz’s treatment of Polish poetry as a revolt against the forces of historical necessity. I use passages from his *History* and essays on Adam Mickiewicz, Cyprian Norwid, and poets of the postwar generation to argue that, in Miłosz’s reading, Polish literature, more than merely describing the dramatic struggle against necessity, enacts that struggle as a participant.

Chapter Two begins by acknowledging that Milan Kundera (b. 1929) is suspicious of the very interpretive function that this dissertation seeks to analyze. In this chapter I argue that Kundera’s valorization of the “large,” or universal context over the “small,” or national—a theme of his later nonfiction—has motivated his criticism from its earliest days when he attempted to introduce intimate themes and subjective modernist devices into “realist” Marxist poetry in the mid-1950s. His hope that Czech literature would reach beyond its own provincial political and cultural horizons drove his criticism through the late 1960s, and his refusal to become unduly entangled in the interpretive duties of a cultural emissary has shaped his critical activity ever since.

Few literary figures have been as closely associated in the global popular imagination with the political and cultural developments of his or her homeland as Kundera. He had already become a public figure in France before the 1968 French translation of his first novel *The Joke* (*Žert*) and, since his 1975 emigration to France, he has done more than anyone else through his fiction and nonfiction to shape Western popular notions of the Prague Spring and the period that followed. A handful of Kundera’s essays written in the early and mid-1980s that appeared in *The New York Review of Books* incited a debate inside and outside Czechoslovakia about the notion of Central Europe. The Czech philosopher and critic Květoslav Chvatík asserts that, even among those who disagree with Kundera’s conclusions, it is widely acknowledged that the essay “The Tragedy of Central Europe” “did immeasurably more to awaken global public interest in the Czech question than any well-intentioned proclamations by politicians.”

Chapter Three begins by considering Joseph Brodsky’s (1940-1996) ambiguous pronouncements about “the Russian tradition,” a phrase he uses as a term of both praise and...
abuse. Brodsky claims that popular notions of the Russian tradition, fed by the translations of Constance Garnett and by Western Orientalist tropes about suffering, celebrate a solipsistic realism that is preoccupied with national trauma and with the pernicious spirit of what he calls “false consolation.” I also consider Brodsky’s notion of a parallel tradition in which writers strive to transcend lived experience and cope with trauma by “keeping strict accounts” with their own consciences. Finally, I discuss the concept of ambivalence, which Brodsky calls “the paramount spiritual experience” of Russia’s modern era, and I trace the evolution of its function in his criticism. In an essay in which Brodsky contemplates the responsibilities of exile, he writes that the function of literature is “to save the next man, a new arrival, from falling into an old trap.” This chapter argues that his essays on Russian literature are in essence a history of how writers have responded to this commission.

Only a few months after his forced emigration from the Soviet Union in 1972, Brodsky published an essay in The New York Times Magazine in which he declared that his greatest obligation of all is to the Russian language. Much of his subsequent activity may be understood as the fulfillment of this obligation in an effort to “bring new readers to Russian literature and give them a new understanding of the Russian literary world,” as Solomon Volkov describes the purpose of the book of interviews on which he and Brodsky collaborated. When asked once why he had written so little about Pushkin, Brodsky replied, “What’s left to write about Pushkin? […] The essays I write are above all a way of popularizing. When I write about Russian authors, it’s usually in English for Anglophone readers who know relatively little about Russian

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Brodsky’s legendary dissatisfaction with translations of his own and others’ work must have contributed to his belief that Russian literature required a sensitive and tenacious advocate. He was notoriously irritated, for example, by the refusal of translators to convey the fidelity to classical forms that distinguishes modern Russian poetry, a mark, he claimed, of its moral purity. A review of *The Gulag Archipelago* laments that the book’s “linguistic fabric alone would give its readers shivers” if only they could read it in Russian. Such reservations, and responses such as W. H. Auden’s disappointing assessment of Mandelstam’s greatness (“The translations I have seen don’t convince me of it.”), impelled Brodsky to assume the task of honoring and promulgating the work of writers whose reputations had yet to achieve the standing in the West that he felt they deserved.

This dissertation begins with Czesław Milosz, who in 1982 introduced the first issue of the journal *Cross Currents* with an essay that traced the shifting axes of cultural influence in Europe. “Looking for a Center: On the Poetry of Central Europe” describes the irony with which Poles had come to regard a spiritually atrophied West, which seemed resigned to trading its role as subject of history for that of object. Paris, the capital of Polish exile in the nineteenth century and of modernism until the middle of the twentieth, had lost its confidence and found itself on the periphery after the Second World War, suspended in the competing gravitational fields of

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New York and Moscow. Polish poetry since the war, writes Miłosz, can be read as “a history of the gradual realization that former centers of attraction do not offer much in terms of values.”

Contemporary Polish and other Central European poetry was virtually unknown to English readers when translations by Miłosz and others began appearing a few decades after the war. Clare Cavanagh argues that they met a deep need in American writers accustomed to producing poetry only about themselves. Nostalgia for what Seamus Heaney called “the republic of conscience” was equally strong elsewhere in the Anglophone world, and Cavanagh lists several Nobel and national laureates who cite the influence of Miłosz and his compatriots on their work, including Derek Walcott, W. S. Merwin, Ted Hughes, and Heaney himself. Perhaps no event contributed more to the growing profile of Polish poetry than the 1965 publication of Miłosz’s anthology *Postwar Polish Poetry*. “Time after time,” Cavanagh recalls, “I’ve heard American authors speak of this book as a turning point in their own poetic development.”

Irena Grudzińska Gross writes that Miłosz, Zbigniew Herbert, and Wisława Szymborska came to be seen as “models of how to write poetry that is both personal and civic” and that many attribute the place of contemporary Polish poetry in the American literary consciousness almost uniquely to the efforts of Miłosz.

*Postwar Polish Poetry* features the work of many translators, but it grew out of Miłosz’s own attempts from his years as a cultural attaché in Washington in the late 1940s, when he tried and failed to interest his hosts in poems by Tadeusz Różewicz. It is a problem endemic to émigré writers, he lamented, that a context for one’s work must often be constructed out of thin

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21 Clare Cavanagh, *Lyric Poetry and Modern Politics: Russia, Poland and the West* (New Haven, 2009), p. 246.
22 *Fellowship of Poets* 253, 94.
air. The process of selection when translating and otherwise promoting Polish literature thus rested partly on the modest criteria of accessibility and likely appeal. Priority was given largely to poets and works that presented the fewest problems in terms of language.

Equally important to the anthology—and fundamental to Miłosz’s notion of what a “Polish school” of literature might look like—was the principle that a work should be full of content. This grew partly out of his boredom with new American poetry indifferent to historical events and concerned primarily with the erotic dramas of English professors and their graduate students. Their technique, he writes, is excellent, but there is nothing for them to write about: “Nothing drives them to leap like salmon confronting an obstacle.”24 Miłosz believed that Western poetry has long been marked by a schism between the poet and the “great human family,” the result of the cult of the poète maudit, an excessive pursuit of technical refinement, and the absence of compelling content. The schism, he claims, has lasted until the present and represents a deep impoverishment of poetry. The first chapter, then, will explain how modern Polish literature began to heal the schism, according to Miłosz, through constant engagement with history and through the individual’s participation in the fate of the collective.

Chapter One - Czeslaw Milosz and the Struggle against Necessity

To accept everything just as one accepts
Summer after spring, winter after autumn,
Follow human affairs with the same coldness
With which we gape at Nature’s absurd progress?
As long as I’m alive, I shall say—No. ¹
Czeslaw Milosz, “Antigone”

In February of 1951, Czeslaw Milosz requested political asylum in Paris, where he was serving as cultural attaché for the communist Polish government. Three months later he published the essay “Nie” (“No”) in the Paris-based Polish émigré journal Kultura.² In Poland Milosz had been counted among what in the essay he calls “good pagans,” citizens who had not joined the governing Polish United Workers Party but were considered politically benign and sometimes trusted with sensitive responsibilities, such as Milosz’s own service as attaché in Washington and Paris. As he explains in “Nie,” his decision to emigrate came during a time of growing pressure on writers to conform to official doctrine and it followed the realization that his own forced baptism into the “New Faith” was imminent. The essay’s analysis of this and other choices writers faced in the Soviet Union and its satellites anticipates his book The Captive Mind (Zniewolony umysł, 1953). A powerful consideration in a writer’s decision whether to join the Party, according to these texts, was the argument that refusal was futile and even perverse, given what Marx had called the “iron necessity” of the economic forces driving the proletarian revolution.³

¹ “Przyjmować wszystko, tak, jak się przyjmuje/ Po wiośnie lato, zimę po jesieni,/ Na sprawy ludzkie patrzeć obojętnie/ Jak na kolejność bezmyślnej przyrody?/ Dopóki żyję, będę wołać: nie.” All translations mine unless otherwise noted.
² Kultura (1947-2000) was an important literary-political journal founded and edited by Jerzy Giedroyc and published by Instytut Literacki. Kultura published the work of many Polish intellectuals living both in Poland and abroad, and became known for the breadth of political opinions represented in its pages.
³ “It is a question of these laws [of capitalist production] themselves, of these tendencies working with iron necessity towards inevitable results.” Karl Marx, Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 1, Preface to First German
As its title suggests, “Nie” serves as a manifesto of sorts, explaining Miłosz’s exit from his homeland but also challenging the reader to scrutinize the assumptions underlying claims that the regime and its practices were a matter of historical inevitability. Its final paragraphs include a dramatic, vivid metaphor for the tenacious new political reality in Poland:

For thousands of years humankind lived in terror before the power of nature, yielding to its necessity and attempting only to placate it, until the power of nature was subdued by those who denied its necessity. [...] Was the man who first crossed the sea in a dugout canoe any less crazy than one who believes it is possible to organize a society without slavery, lies and fear? The boundary represented by the seashore was for that first man a necessity every bit as insurmountable as the boundary represented by scientifically developed terror is for people of the twentieth century.4

The speculation here about what is “possible” in society is supported by Miłosz’s own experience testing art’s capacity to resist overwhelming historical currents, both fascist and communist. His choice to couch his argument in elemental terms, comparing these historical forces to natural ones, is no mere rhetorical flourish. Utopian dogmas that came to fruition in the twentieth century had arisen in the nineteenth—which Miłosz provocatively called the worst of centuries5—when they were buttressed by the positivist idea that society is governed by laws as absolute as those operating in the physical world. Many revolutionaries thus came to believe that the success of their project was inevitable, and that abandoning established norms of political behavior was an acceptable expedient for its achievement. The invocation of “necessity” by

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4 “Przez tysiące lat ludzkość żyła w trwodze przed potęgami przyrody, poddając się ich koniecznościom i próbując je jedynie ubłagać. Aż potęgi przyrody zostały okiełznane przez tych, którzy zaprzeczyli konieczności. [...] Czy człowiek, który pierwszy przepłynął zatokę morską w czołnie z kory, był w mniejszym stopniu szaleńcem niż ten, który utrzymuje, że można wynaleźć sposób zorganizowania społeczeństwa bez niewolnictwa, kłamstwa i strachu? Granica, jaką stanowił brzeg burzliwego morza była dla pierwotnego człowieka koniecznością równie nieprzewidywalną, jak dla człowieka XX wieku granica, którą stwarza naukowo opracowany terror.” Czesław Miłosz, “Nie,” Kultura 43 (1951), pp. 3-13 (12).

Marx underscores the skepticism about human agency that prevailed nearly two hundred years after Newton’s laws of motion compelled philosophers to reconcile notions of free will with his determinist mechanics. Miłosz’s “Nie” thus represents a refusal as existential as it is political, declaring the author’s rejection of Marxist historical materialism but also affirming the integrity of the human individual, grounded in the intuitive awareness of his ability to make moral choices, whatever historical or natural “necessities” may impinge on his fate.

Nevertheless, Miłosz is plainly haunted by the idea of historical necessity. History itself—the movement of the human species through time, the individual’s experience of communal events, historical tragedy and its implications for art as a moral activity—is the raw material of his poetry and a constant presence in his criticism. His long poem *A Treatise on Poetry* gives sustained attention to problems of history and especially to the notion that it is driven by teleological forces of one kind or another. A memorable passage depicts Warsaw under Nazi occupation, visited by an ominously jaunty Spirit of History. A lengthy author’s note explains that the figure alludes to Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*: historical progress as an intentional force, shaping and fulfilling the desires of the collective will. “Is history just a mass of facts,” the note asks, “without traceable logic or direction? Or is it submitted to hidden laws?” Miłosz seems less interested in the question itself than in how others have responded to it, observing that a mystical identification with the Zeitgeist increases a group’s susceptibility to totalitarian ideologies. But he is cagey, replying to his own question with evident ambivalence:

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6 Adults educated in Czechoslovakia before 1989 recall Spinoza’s aphorism that “Freedom is the recognition of necessity” (“Svoboda je poznána nutnost.”) as part of the Communist youth catechism. Decades before the publication of Newton’s *Principia*, Spinoza had declared that “In the nature of things nothing contingent is admitted, but all things are determined by the necessity of divine nature to exist and act in a certain way.” Stuart Hampshire, *Spinoza and Spinozism* (Oxford, 2005), p. 46.

He contemplates a figure in the poem who rides a bicycle beneath the Spirit’s outstretched palm, identified as a delegate from the doomed, quixotic Polish government in exile. Miłosz explains that those who fail to recognize plain truths are ill-favored by history, just as poetry is impossible when we cling to habits of thought that obscure reality.\(^8\)

Yet more troubling for Miłosz are the metaphysical questions underlying the problem of human agency in history, which is to say questions about the operation of necessity in nature itself and its implications for the meaning of human activity. The defiance of necessity expressed in “Nie” belies Miłosz’s deep, pervasive apprehension about the effects of modern, technological civilization on man’s understanding of himself, and this apprehension motivates much of his poetry and criticism. The final section of *A Treatise on Poetry* turns on an anecdote from his brief post-war stay in the United States, when the sight of a beaver makes him reflect on the distance that separates human striving and suffering from that of the rest of the natural world. Miłosz notes that an important distinguishing feature of human consciousness is “the memory of the species,” or the ability to imagine events that occurred before one was born.\(^9\) It is no accident then that the encounter occurs in America, chaotic and unmediated by the experience of previous generations, and closely identified in Miłosz’s imagination with nature and thus with necessity itself. The central question in *Treatise* is that of poetry’s purpose, and Miłosz concludes that Polish poetry must commit itself to participating in life rather than retreat into contemplation, and such a commitment must be anchored to collective memory.

This chapter proposes that, for Miłosz, the modern struggle of the Poles for self-determination and man’s perpetual struggle against nature are merely two aspects of a single larger struggle against necessity. The allegory of the canoe in “Nie” is an early indication of

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\(^8\) Ibid., pp. 97-101.

Miłosz’s belief that the specific historical problem facing Poland at the mid-point of the twentieth century signifies a broader civilizational problem confronting humanity in the modern era: Having voluntarily surrendered to both History and Nature, man has made himself a slave to the necessity that appears to be at work in both. Underlying Miłosz’s critical treatment of Polish literature, from “Nie” in 1951 to the retrospective essay “With Polish Poetry against the World” four decades later, is the implicit idea that Polish literature, more than merely depicting the dramatic struggle against necessity, is itself a participant in the struggle, actively remembering and searching for meaning in places where there appears to be none. “With Polish Poetry against the World” identifies two essential characteristics of Polish literature that support this function: its “constant fusion with history” and the “participation of the individual in the fate of the collectivity.”

Miłosz’s anthologies, histories, and essays about poets such as Adam Mickiewicz, Cyprian Norwid, and the poets of the postwar generation seek to demonstrate the importance of these two qualities in meeting the condition he pronounces at the end of The Captive Mind: “Today the only poetry worthy of the name is eschatological, that is, poetry which rejects the present inhuman world in the name of a great change.”

The chapter’s first half will focus on Miłosz’s preoccupation with nature as the face of necessity, and the second half will focus on his attention to Polish poetry as a revolt against necessity as it acts through history. Miłosz begins The Land of Ulro, a book that gives sustained attention to the first problem, by noting that his works about Polish matters intended for non-Polish readers tend to be “of a practical, even pedagogic nature,” whereas those works touching on more abstract and esoteric matters are written with Polish readers in mind. As a

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consequence, this chapter’s first half will deal largely with material written for Polish readers (and later translated into other languages), while the second half will deal largely with material written for Western readers. The vast majority of the works considered in this chapter were written and first published during the two decades between 1955 and 1975, when Milosz was most fully engaged with these questions.

THE NECESSITY OF NATURE

1. NATURE AS A METAPHOR FOR HISTORY

The parable of the man who first crossed the sea in a dugout canoe in “Nie” compares a recent, historical phenomenon to an ancient, natural phenomenon in order to comment on the proposition that deterministic forces are at work in the historical domain. The yoking of nature and history is a common trope in Milosz’s rhetoric and is motivated by the question of whether the two things operate under the same “law of necessity.” His correspondence with Thomas Merton offers many examples of the trope, including the following excerpts from three letters written in 1959 and 1960: “As to myself, I have always felt the burden of blind and cruel necessity, of mechanism, in Nature, in my body, in my psychology. [But] for me History, as a purely human domain, alien to Nature, meant liberation.” Elsewhere he writes: “Only it is so that the palate of your readers is used to very strong sauces and le Prince de ce monde\(^\text{13}\) is a constant subject of their reflections. That ruler of Nature and of History (if laws are different, necessity is similar) does not annoy you enough—in your writings.” And again:

Nature and History, both, seem to me subjected to the terrible necessity, iron necessity, which is the domain of Prince de ce monde. […] One correction. I do not identify Nature and History and do not ascribe to them the same kind of necessity. “Historical Necessity” of

\(^{13}\) In the Gospel of John 12:31 and 14:30, Christ refers to Satan as “the prince of this world.”
totalitarians is a projection of the XIXth c. scientific outlook in biology etc into the World of Man, which belongs to Nature and does not belong at the same time—that projection is a source of great evil.

The friends’ correspondence often dwelled on similar metaphysical and political topics, informed by the monk’s interest in East European poetry and the poet’s study of Thomism while at Stefan Batory University in Vilnius.\textsuperscript{14}

To be sure, Miłosz was not a Marxist or a Hegelian and, by the time of his correspondence with Merton, theories of historical determinism had lost their hold on serious political discourse, even in the “socialist republics.”\textsuperscript{15} As the more categorical assertions cited above indicate, he did not believe anything resembling the idea that history progresses in predictable stages governed by ineluctable laws akin to those governing nature. Yet the two categories have some things in common: like nature, history exists in time and is subject to causality and, as with nature, the imagination has a way of perceiving a purposefulness in history’s movement and processes. Using the language of one to discuss the other is a habit as old as Western thought.\textsuperscript{16} Systems of providential philosophy rooted in the idea of history as a natural, law-governed process betray the influence of Christian teleology, which proclaims the intervention of nature’s Author in history and its ultimate fulfillment through Christ. Moreover, history is comprised of the actions of people who, as material beings, are subject to the laws of nature and to the entropy that acts upon its material; to say that nature subsumes history, one

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Striving Towards Being} 84, 65, 50.


\textsuperscript{16} In the first book of Aristotle’s \textit{Politics}, the development of the \textit{polis} from more basic societal units is said to have been a natural process, working toward an ideal form whose purpose was human flourishing: “And when many villages so entirely join themselves together as in every respect to form but one society, that society is a city, and contains in itself, if I may so speak, the end and perfection of government: first founded that we might live, but continued that we may live happily. For which reason every city must be allowed to be the work of nature.” (\textit{Politics} I.2 1252b)
need rely not on Marxist or Hegelian premises, but merely on basic materialist assumptions. For Europeans who had experienced revolution and two cataclysmic wars in rapid, dismaying succession, the idea of history as a virtual force of nature, operating under its own malign laws with inevitable outcomes, must have seemed plausible and real, irrespective of passing political theories. For those whose fate was shaped by the geographical fact of their existence in the lands between Germany and Russia, it must have seemed more true than for most. When facing the kinds of choices Miłosz describes in *The Captive Mind* and “Nie,” the apparent inevitability of the new order and the temptation to bet on the stronger horse must have invited comparisons to overwhelming natural phenomena and elicited arguments about the futility of resistance. It is such feelings of powerlessness and despair that the parable in “Nie” identifies and addresses.

In speaking of humankind’s struggle with the necessity of nature as a metaphor for its struggle with necessity (whether real or imagined) in history, we presume the existence of the former and we imply that it is the more essential human experience. The tasks of the first half of this chapter, then, are to demonstrate the importance of the problem of the necessity of nature in Miłosz’s prose and to describe his attempt to understand the problem through the work of Polish and non-Polish writers, including Witold Gombrowicz, Robinson Jeffers, Simone Weil, and Lev Shestov. For Miłosz the challenge presented by the forces of necessity in nature is indeed the more fundamental of the two concerns, touching on the questions of mystery and the physical world, reason and faith, man’s place in the universe, and his responsibility to his fellow creatures, and it is one that informs Miłosz’s thought at a very basic level and influences his treatment of countless additional, more mundane questions. It is a wholly modern problem, with origins in the scientific discoveries that banished man from his place at the center of the universe before revealing him to be the mere product of random processes driven by an amoral, universal
struggle to survive and reproduce; and it was profoundly magnified during the twentieth century, when events appeared to demonstrate that a God who is both good and omnipotent, one who for centuries had merely seemed hidden from view, cannot exist.

2. THE SOVEREIGNTY OF NATURE

Miłosz’s response to “nature” itself, whether in its broadest, most abstract sense or its most concrete manifestations, is a viscerally antagonistic one, as if its object represents the very principle of necessity under which it operates: “Every time you speak of Nature,” he rebukes Merton, “it appears to you as soothing, rich in symbols, as a veil or a curtain. You do not pay much attention to torture and suffering.”¹⁷ Miłosz’s memoir A Year of the Hunter contains an oddly strident protest against graphic television nature documentaries, particularly those intended for young viewers, because of their solemn acknowledgment of the supremacy of the law of the jungle and, by implication, its sovereignty over human lives. “If I turn off the television, horrified, disgusted by the images of mutual indifferent devouring,” he writes, it is because “I am capable of picturing what this looks like when translated into the life of human society.”¹⁸ At times it seems that for Miłosz nature stands metonymically for death, and the gloom it evokes recalls Camus’s encounter with the absurd—the moment when the desire for meaning is confronted by its absence. Miłosz regards biology as the most pernicious of the sciences, since it affects our understanding of our lives most profoundly, tying man unambiguously to the natural order and subverting the myth of his creation as a living soul. Equally noxious is its effect on how man understands his own death, since the individual life is a meaningless and expendable unit in the process of natural selection. Belonging to the natural order “means submission to

¹⁷ Striving Towards Being 64.
blind necessity, to the force of gravity, all that which is opposed to meaning and thus offends my mind. As a creature of flesh, I am part of that order, but it is without my consent. […] Man is inwardly contradictory because he resides in between.”

The contradiction awakening this protest points to the heart of Miłosz’s anxiety, which is the human animal’s imprisonment in the realm of substance, in spite of its intuition that it is more than the sum of its material parts. Modern, mechanistic explanations of consciousness and the will in terms of sheer biological function confirm the reduction that has occurred in man’s self-conception from a being created in God’s image to the species *Homo sapiens*. An image from the “Natura” chapter of *A Treatise on Poetry* vividly expresses the dilemma: “Yesterday a snake crossed the road at dusk. / Crushed by a tire, it writhed on the asphalt. / We are both the snake and the wheel.” Man is of nature and, at the same time, he is not. When discussing William Blake’s influence on his understanding of nature and man, Miłosz pauses to name several other poets and philosophers that have shaped his thinking on the subject, such as Emanuel Swedenborg, Dostoevsky, and his own uncle Oscar Milosz, and he identifies the thread that unites this odd assortment: “That thread is my anthropocentrism and my bias against Nature.”

Nature is the central battlefield in the struggle against necessity, and man is Miłosz’s protagonist. Miłosz himself engages in the struggle by guarding his integrity as a being who “resides in between” and by acknowledging and taking responsibility for the claims made on him by other members of the species.

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20 *A Treatise on Poetry* 51.
21 *The Land of Ulro* 159.
22 Miłosz offers a partial explanation of his “anthropocentrism” through the paradoxical coinage *pragmatic absolute*, which describes a means of intuiting values in the absence of religious belief: “Where do values come from? What guarantees them? Simone Weil, for example, or Jaspers, replies that all values vanish like mist unless you accept the Absolute. [Dwight] Macdonald dismisses religion. Values for him are, so to speak, pragmatically absolute—if these words are not mutually contradictory; obviously we can discover a link with Lao-tse, but not with an inhabitant of Saturn. ‘The root is man.’” Czeslaw Milosz, *Beginning with My Streets*, trans. Madeline G. Levine (New York, 1991), p. 185.
Yet society’s claims on a person will undermine his integrity as soon as foster it, and these claims—particularly those of modern civilization—must have their limits. Miłosz regards human culture as a protective structure, a “cocoon” whose purpose is to separate man from nature’s violence by enclosing him in layers of meaning accumulated over time: “We alone among living creatures have a history, we move in a gigantic labyrinth where the present and the past are interwoven. That labyrinth protects and consoles us, for it is anti-nature.” But civilization has reached a point of such complexity and technological sophistication, he believes, that by subordinating ourselves to it fully we paradoxically accede to nature’s dominance. Instead of deepening the bonds among man’s disparate parts, technological civilization exaggerates the duality, isolating man’s intellect from his basic needs and still “dragging down” what is divine in him. The triumph of empirical inquiry over other ways of comprehending the world, a triumph amplified and exaggerated by the positivist tradition, compels Miłosz to resist scientism’s ever shrinking conception of the human person and society’s pervasive, quasi-religious faith in scientific progress.

In Miłosz’s eyes, nothing embodies modern man’s restoration to nature as completely as America, a “civilization which to its members appears to be Nature itself.” Its discovery by Europeans, its rise, and the spread of its influence coincided with the age of scientific discoveries and the transformations they occasioned in man’s understanding of himself. A central trope of Visions from San Francisco Bay, written nearly a decade after Miłosz’s 1960 arrival at U.C. Berkeley, is the comparison of California’s alien physical environment, as experienced by a European immigrant, to the disorienting effects when the familiar metaphysical landmarks faded

23 Visions from San Francisco Bay 176-77.
25 Visions from San Francisco Bay 68.
from view and modern man found himself alone in a universe of necessity: “But still I find something oppressive in the virginity of this country, virgin in the sense that it seems to be waiting for its names. […] Our species is now on a mad adventure. We are flung into a world which appears to be a nothing.”

In the “Berkeley” entry of Milosz’s ABC’s, the view from the city’s heights is described as “lunar,” “like the quintessence of American spaces.” In A Year of the Hunter, the sun sets beyond the towers of San Francisco “as if behind a mountain range.” A Year of the Hunter is full of good-humored but estranging details about Miłosz’s struggles with rampaging deer and an out-of-control feijoa bush (in what was in fact a densely populated suburb), as well as passing references to an earthquake or haze from a distant forest fire, colorful exotica that evocatively distinguish his life in California from the one he left behind in Poland and France.

If there is a European antithesis to California’s “monstrous vistas,” it is the garden-like provincial countryside, the physical manifestation of the civilizational “cocoon”—human in scale, cultivated, and mediated by the experience of previous generations: “Europe’s landscapes are a metaphor of its entire past—its byways, its emotional attachment to what is foolishly local, the slow build-up of towns and principalities into larger complexes.” The conventional European reverence for nature is, Miłosz claims, delimited by the scale of its object—nature subdued and domesticated—or by its dilution through the presence of the human figure, however small in

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26 Ibid., 8.
28 A Year of the Hunter, e.g. pp. 9, 20, 25, 39, 112, 218, 263. Miłosz’s descriptions of the Bay area are similar to Sartre’s impressions of Manhattan, which offers little protection against the elements. Sartre’s New York “is a city of open sky. […] Even in the depths of my apartment a hostile, deaf, mysterious nature assails me. I seem to be camping in the heart of a jungle swarming with insects. There is the moaning of the wind, there are the electric shocks I receive when I touch the doorknob or shake hands with a friend; there are the roaches that run through my kitchen, the elevators that make my heart contract, the unquenchable thirst that burns me from morning till night. New York is a colonial city, a camping ground. All the hostility, all the cruelty of the world are present in this most prodigious monument man has ever raised to himself.” Jean-Paul Sartre, “Manhattan: The Great American Desert,” trans. unidentified, Essays of the Masters, 1956, ed. Charles Neider (New York, 2000), pp. 314-21 (318).
comparison.\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Visions from San Francisco Bay} contains a single poem by Miłosz, one that begins with a condescending nod at the naïve anthropomorphism of pre-modern Slavic folk poets, for whom “the sun was a farmer’s ruddy face, the moon peeped through a cloud, and the Milky Way gladdened them like a birch-lined road.” Yet by the end of the poem, Miłosz has declared himself firmly for this humble tradition: “Better to carve suns and moons on the joints of crosses as was done in my district. To birches and firs give feminine names. To implore protection against the mute and treacherous might than to proclaim, as you did, an inhuman thing.”\textsuperscript{30} The lines are addressed to Robinson Jeffers, the twentieth-century California poet of “inhumanism” who saw beauty and harmony in the innocent, purposeless movement of matter and regarded the grasping, solipsistic human species as a disfiguring presence in the universe. Miłosz is both repelled and fascinated by Jeffers, and his response is ambivalent. He admires the integrity of Jeffers’s tragic pantheism, and prefers it to the desiccated theism and complacent atheism that prevail in modern society.\textsuperscript{31} But he and Jeffers disagree about what is “real,” and he is mostly unmoved by the material phenomena that are for Jeffers the essence of reality. Ocean depths and sea-cliffs are for the humanist Miłosz a gallery of two-dimensional images, and “the struggle of poetry with the world cannot take place within a museum.”\textsuperscript{32}

America’s most alienating aspect for Miłosz is what might be called its easy relationship with necessity. The populations that flooded the Americas in the modern era enacted the most brutal of Darwinian principles and seem the very embodiment of Marx’s claims regarding the primacy of matter in motion. Miłosz observes that justifications for American western expansion rested on appeals to necessity: U.S. military conquests and the ensuing bounty were attributed to

\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Visions from San Francisco Bay} 38.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 95-96.
\textsuperscript{31} “I acknowledge his superiority to his fellow citizens who sat down at the table, folded their hands in prayer, and said: ‘God is dead. Hooray! Let’s eat!’” Ibid., 92-93.
\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Beginning with My Streets} 157.
the favor of Providence and the inevitability of democracy’s spread and ultimate success. But his revulsion at the eradication of America’s native people does not obscure his horror at what he considers the cruelty of their own habits. When discussing the diary of a 17th-century Spanish missionary, he declares that he trusts the judgments of its author more than he does modern anti-colonialist “romantic fantasies.” In the missionary’s account, lives of indigenous people are characterized by “filth, stench, constant fear of death because of the unending war of all against all,” and hunger. Elsewhere Miłosz praises a recently published history of colonial America for its refusal to apply the expected moral template: The historian’s pessimism impelled him to examine “mechanisms that were stronger than people entrapped in events. The Indian peoples engaged in wars with each other, concluding alliances with the French or the English, and thereby preparing their own extermination.” What is important to Miłosz is not the historian’s flouting of progressive orthodoxies, but his attention to the native peoples’ intimacy with the physical facts of disease, violence and death, and their enslavement to the deeper “mechanisms” of nature and history.

3. GOMBROWICZ THE MANICHAEAN

Miłosz gives his most sustained attention to the problem of necessity in nature in what is certainly one of his least known and most arcane works, The Land of Ulro. The book’s title alludes to the mythology elaborated by William Blake in his Prophetic Books, in which Ulro is the name given to the fallen, material world, separated from Eternity and inhabited by suffering,

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34 A Year of the Hunter 204.
35 Milosz’s ABCs 231-32.
36 The Preface to the English-language edition explains that Milosz did not consider the possibility of the book’s translation as he was writing it. The preface begins: “Dear reader, this book was not intended for you, and I feel you should be forewarned before you enter its bizarre tangle.”
mortal man. Miłosz outlines the books’ complex mythological architecture, most importantly the four elements comprising primeval man before the Fall that leads to his dissolution. As with Blake’s *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, here evil is regarded as the effect not of any one element in particular but of their separation from one another, and man is considered complete only when reconciliation occurs among the disparate elements: *Tharmas* (body), *Urthona* (imagination), *Luvah* (emotion), and *Urizen* (reason). Miłosz speculates that the first three elements signify the presence of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost in man, noting also that the fourth shares many qualities with Satan, including a mind that draws “distinctions where none were meant to be; […] solitude and distance; power of the intellect and a fanatic ability to wield abstraction.”

In fact, the association of Reason with the demonic is made explicit in what has become known as Blake’s “Trinity of evil,” comprised of Newton, Bacon, and Locke, to whom Blake assigns collective responsibility for the modern triumph of materialism and doubt. Miłosz believes that the *Prophetic Books* engage in an important dialogue with the “scientific world-view,” rejecting as they do the subordination of the perceiving, desiring, sinning subject to the external world of objective necessity. Such a position distinguishes Blake from later Romantics, who embraced

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37 *The Land of Ulro* 166-68. According to Miłosz, for Carl Jung the Holy Trinity cannot serve as an adequate symbol of the human personality and requires Satan to form a tetrad, said to be the more conventional representation of the personality in dreams and art. Miłosz believes he sees such an archetype at work in Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*: “The father, Fyodor, represents the burden of carnality, Tharmas. Dmitri is the embodiment of blind passion, be it love or hatred—or Luvah. Ivan is Urizen or the suffering Luciferian element. Finally, Alyosha personifies Urthona, Imagination, a vulnerability to the inspiration of the Holy Ghost. […] The crime (i.e., parricide or, symbolically, regicide, the murder of Christian Russia) is committed not because one of the Karamazov sons is unmitigatedly evil, since all three are culpable through default.” (*The Land of Ulro* 185)

38 In *Jerusalem, The Emanation of the Giant Albion* (the last of the *Prophetic Books*), a figure whom Blake calls the Reasoning Spectre divides into the Twelve Sons of Albion, its chest disclosing “a hideous orifice; thence issuing, the Giant-brood arise, as the smoke of the furnace, shaking the rocks from sea to sea, and there they combine into Three Forms named Bacon & Newton & Locke.” (*Jerusalem, The Emanation of the Giant Albion, Written and etched 1804-1820* 70:13-15 [The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Donne and The Complete Poetry of William Blake in one volume (New York, 1941).]) Blake’s “Trinity of evil” parodies the popular Enlightenment notion (held by Voltaire and Jefferson) that Bacon, Newton, and Locke comprised a “trinity of the greatest men in history.” Peter A. Schouls, *Descartes and the Enlightenment* (Kingston, ON, 1989), p. 177.
subjectivity as a means of freeing the imagination but ultimately conceded that the truth lies with
science.

As crucial as the question of man’s fragmented nature is to *The Land of Ulro*, the book’s
importance lies primarily in the challenge it poses to the much more fundamental problem of
necessity itself. A universe driven by necessity is the book’s essential problem, with implications
for how we are to derive meaning and value. Witold Gombrowicz, who receives scant attention
from Miłosz in texts dealing more directly with Polish literature, plays an unexpectedly large
anchoring role here, initially appearing to embody the temptation of nihilism when confronting
the absence of meaning but later offering something of a solution. An early chapter recounts
Miłosz’s supervision of a dissertation on Gombrowicz undertaken by an American student, a
“humanitarian and progressive” steeped in a modern distillation of Enlightenment ideas about
man’s innate goodness and perfectibility. The student’s admiration for Gombrowicz’s virtuosity
does not prevent his recoiling at the author’s macabre sensibility, which he perceives as
“fundamentally misanthropic,” “an insidious mockery of everything that makes us human and
that makes life possible in a humane society.” Like Gombrowicz himself, the student is an
atheist, and it is in this detail that Miłosz detects the key to his disappointment: such mordant
skepticism about man, which the student might find justified and excusable in a believer such as
Dostoevsky, is considered nihilistic in a fellow atheist and a betrayal of humanism.39

Miłosz’s response is to consider what it means to be an atheist and what it implies for
man’s understanding of himself. He cites Jacques Monod’s observation that philosophical
systems based on belief in a kind of benign determinism, such as his graduate student’s faith in
human progress, suffer from the very anthropomorphism that underlies religion. That is, they are
characterized by a kind of “animism” that infers an organizing principle at work in the universe

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39 *The Land of Ulro* 33-37.
akin to the one at work in the perceiving mind. This includes even an ostensibly atheistic ideology like dialectical materialism, which holds that the dialectic will guide history through its stages until communal ownership and wealth are inevitably achieved.\textsuperscript{40} Such belief, Miłosz asserts, is also a feature of less conspicuously providential belief systems, including the idea of “human life in harmony with Nature, the cosmos, or universal Reason” that often passes for atheism in the post-Christian West. A “true atheist,” by contrast, is acutely conscious of man’s “unnaturalness,” of his status as an alien intelligence in a universe ruled by necessity. The stance of the true atheist, which is to recognize that man is alone and that his aloneness entails certain responsibilities, is essentially existentialist. Filled with terror at the universe’s indifference, but subject to its physical laws; unmoored from ancient foundations of value, but compelled to live among his fellow creatures, the true atheist has no choice but to embrace a strict moral code of his own devising. “Strip good and evil of any metaphysical sanction,” Miłosz writes: “they only gain for being human, for being a challenge hurled into the anti-human void, for answering to a humanly rooted need.”\textsuperscript{41}

Gombrowicz reappears toward the end of \textit{Ulro} as Miłosz’s example of a true atheist. Just as for Miłosz, for Gombrowicz a confrontation with the fact of man’s isolation is a terrifying thing and is closely tied to his empathy for human pain—the very empathy the American graduate student fails to see. In his \textit{History of Polish Literature} Miłosz cites Gombrowicz’s play \textit{The Marriage Ceremony (Ślub, 1953)}, beginning with an excerpt from its Introduction: “Man is subject to that which is created ‘between’ individuals, and he has no other divinity but that which springs from other people.” The protagonist Henry has a vision of an “earthly church,” through which the aggressive, daily interactions among the characters and the resulting process of mutual

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 56.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 252-54.
“deformation” may be understood as a kind of sanctification. Miłosz cites Henry’s monologue at length:

I don’t believe in God or in Reason!
Enough of these gods! Give me man!
May he be like me, troubled and immature,
Confused and incomplete, dark and obscure,
So I can dance with him! Play with him! Fight with him!
Pretend to him! Ingratiate myself with him!
And rape him, love him, and forge myself
Anew from him, so I can grow through him, and in that way
Celebrate my marriage in the sacred human church!42

The anthropocentrism Gombrowicz shares with Miłosz coexists with a dread of a universe that seems malign and even demonic in its promise of pain and death. In *The Land of Ulro* Miłosz cites Gombrowicz’s *Diary*:

I am afraid of the devil, very afraid. A strange admission coming from an unbeliever. Still, I am unable to free myself from the concept. […] What are police, laws, safety measures against the Freak that moves among us with such impunity, against which there is no protection, nothing, nothing, no barrier between us and it. It has a free hand among us, the freest! What distances the festive leisure of the afternoon stroller from that nether region rent by the screams of suffering men?

“Until the end of my days,” Gombrowicz declares, “I shall always side with the human estate (even with God—I, an unbeliever!)”43 It is as though Dostoevsky had seen with his own eyes the imagined proof that Christ is outside the truth and the truth outside Christ, and kept his promise that he would prefer to stay with Christ and not with the truth.44

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43 Ibid., 254-55.
Miłosz often describes the late modern era as “neo-Manichaean.” By this he means that man no longer regards himself as a fallen member of a divine natural order, but has come to recognize himself as a part of the fabric of matter itself and thus regards his own suffering and his slavery to necessity as without meaning or the possibility of redemption. Manichaeism, which inspired a number of medieval Christian heresies, grew from Gnostic traditions holding that the world is the creation not of God the Father but of an inferior demiurge (“creator”). The Manichaeans believed that a cosmic clash between forces of light and darkness had produced the material world, which is nothing more than an excretion of the darkness, and that man himself is both the progeny of wicked demons and an accidental repository of divine light. For a time Manichaeism competed with early Christianity, distinct in its claim that the created world is unambiguously and irredeemably evil, while sharing with it the belief in a divine element within man as well as a concern with the origins of sin and human suffering. “Perhaps we live in an age that is atheological only in appearance,” Miłosz writes, arguing that the cruelties of the twentieth century restored the problem of evil to its once central place in philosophical discourse. “If this is a theological age, it has a marked bias for Manichaeism. Modern literature testifies to a sort of rage directed against the world which no longer seems the work of a wise clockmaker. The humor of that literature (and think of Beckett, Ionesco, Genet), if it is humor at all, is a sneer, a ricane ment, thrown in the face of the universe.”

Manichaeism’s tragic, dualist view of man and its accordingly pessimistic understanding of the world naturally resonate with Miłosz’s intuitive understanding of man and necessity.

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47 Emperor of the Earth 85, 96.
When he claims in *The Land of Ulro* that Gombrowicz in his diary sounds “almost like a Manichaean,” this is a declaration of kinship. Miłosz names the problem of evil as one of three guiding “motifs” in his teaching at Berkeley, one that led ultimately to a course dedicated to Manichaeism in the context of Slavic literature. (The other two motifs named are nineteenth-century intellectual history and Polish literature.) The relevance of Manichaeism to Slavic literature, as he explains in *The Land of Ulro*, lies in its importance to the medieval Bulgarian Bogomil heresy, which itself left its mark on elements in Russian Orthodoxy and from there on aspects of modern Russian literature. Miłosz’s choice to consider necessity in these terms owes much to his reading of Simone Weil, who was Jewish by birth, Roman Catholic by conviction, and a Manichaean “by temperament.” In the 1950s he translated several works by Weil into Polish to establish a bridge between Polish Marxists and Catholics, and he confesses that his Berkeley course on Manichaeism was in fact devoted primarily to her. A second important influence in this regard was Lev Shestov. Both Weil and Shestov were concerned with the meaning of suffering, and both sought answers in uncompromising and nontraditional readings of Christian doctrine.

Central to Weil’s writing is the problem of how to reconcile claims of divine mercy with the fact of extreme, unaccountable, earthly suffering. The key to her thinking, according to Miłosz, is her assertion that the *good* and the *necessary* are irreconcilable, since they are separated by an “infinite distance.” Because God (the good) has separated himself from the world (the necessary), the blind necessity of causes and effects is neither good nor evil. Indeed, it is innocent and even beautiful in the mathematical harmony of its laws. Humanity’s tragedy is

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48 *The Land of Ulro* 255.
49 Ibid., 28-29.
50 *Emperor of the Earth* 91.
51 Ibid., 97. *The Land of Ulro* 256.
that it exists in a domain that is temporarily in thrall to the determinism of necessity, even as it recognizes and longs for the good. The view shares much with Manichaean theology, so it is no surprise that Weil considered the Cathars, who practiced a form of the heresy in 12th- and 13th-century France, to be “the only true Christian civilization.” For Shestov, by contrast, the distance between the good and the necessary is beside the point, since for him “the good” is an abstraction and is subordinate to God’s moral law. Shestov regarded science and rational thought as inferior modes, rooted in the knowledge that supplanted the freedom Adam and Eve enjoyed in the Garden, and any moral system based on reason alone is bound to be inferior as well. Miłosz cites the first lines of Shestov’s Potestas Clavium: “The good is not God. We must seek that which is higher than the good. We must seek God.” In other words, God’s mercy is available to those who are faithful to him. Miłosz’s Shestov has no use for Manichaeism or other Gnostic efforts to reconcile the pain of existence with the Christian mercy of the Gospel, fleeing as they do the irrationality of revelation and replacing it with mere ethics. All theodicy commits this error, according to Shestov, because it attempts to explain suffering and other contradictions by subjecting religion to the test of reason.

Weil, steeped in Neoplatonism, refused to dismiss reason and instead embraced contradiction itself as a path to transcendence. Miłosz observes that the contradiction is acute in her interpretation of the Lord’s Prayer, in which Christians are instructed to pray: “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done.” Weil understood the first part as a prayer for the end of the world in its present form, and the second part, paradoxically, as an assent to its existence. Such an assent is possible, she believed, only through divine grace, which is the sign of God’s intervention in—

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52 Emperor of the Earth 90-91, The Land of Ulro 256-57.
53 Emperor of the Earth 106-09.
and the lone exception to—necessity. To Shestov, such resignation amounts to Stoicism, which dismisses the individual’s pain and repudiates his will as an encumbrance to be subdued and reshaped in accord with nature’s decrees. The correct response to necessity, he believed, is the natural one: to protest loudly, to “kick over the table,” to wail and rend one’s clothes in the manner of Job. Miłosz repeatedly casts Weil and Shestov into sharp relief in order to better parse these differences. Yet, as different as Shestov’s protest is from Weil’s grace, as responses to necessity they are not wholly exclusive and indeed they remind us of the two phases of the hero’s response to necessity in Forefather’s Eve (Dziady), Adam Mickiewicz’s dramatic poem and for Miłosz “the key work in Polish literature.” The second half of this chapter will consider Miłosz’s treatment of Forefather’s Eve and modern Polish literature in general as dramatizations of the struggle against necessity in history before discussing those aspects of Polish literature—its orientation toward the collective, and its engagement with history—that Miłosz regards as its specially cultivated tools for confronting necessity.

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54 Ibid., 116-17.
55 Ibid., 104-05.
THE NECESSITY OF HISTORY

4. REJECTING THE WORLD

In *Native Realm* (*Rodzinna Europa*, 1959), a collection of autobiographical essays, Miłosz recalls an encounter he had with a group of exhausted Russian soldiers and their German prisoner in the winter of 1945. The frightened young German is given a cigarette by one soldier, another claps him on the back in good will, and an officer delivers a kind speech in which he explains that the war is nearly over and they intend to do him no harm. The grateful prisoner is led from the room by one of the soldiers, who promptly executes him before returning with the prisoner’s sheepskin coat and gloomily rolling himself a cigarette. Miłosz believes that the hatred and vengeance that accompanied similar crimes on all sides of the war were not evident in this instance, sensing instead a mysterious detachment that he considers essential to the Russian character. The soldiers showed a melancholy distaste for their task, but they wished to avoid the trouble of transferring the prisoner to the rear, they wanted the coat, and such acts were a routine part of war. Exuding sincere mildness and even compassion, they killed their prisoner not out of hatred but “out of respect for necessity.”57

This episode is central to the “Russia” chapter of *Native Realm*, and for Miłosz it is emblematic, a variation on the Polish image of the Russian who weeps bitterly over the man whose throat he has just cut. He sees in the soldiers’ behavior the legacy of currents in Russian Orthodoxy that he attributes to the dualist Bogomil heresy which, true to its Manichaean roots, claimed that God had made man’s soul but the created world of matter was the work of the devil. Miłosz acknowledges his affinity with these medieval believers, who saw in the brutality of man and nature a sign that the Earth was the unredeemed domain of Satan: “Only the Kingdom of

57 *Native Realm* 140-42.
God was to abolish its diabolical law,” which the Bogomils identified with the laws of nature and the created universe. “For this reason Russian mystical writers believed that fulfillment of the Kingdom of God would bring salvation not only to man but also to the fly and the ant. In practice, however, this nearly superhuman empathy cut off intention from deed.58 Elsewhere Miłosz recalls the prisoner’s murder as having been committed “with a deep feeling of sin, but without any feeling of personal guilt whatever.”59 The difference between feeling guilty and feeling sinful, he explains, is between a sensibility to one’s private culpability and the belief that one’s behavior is merely the expression of a universal condition, the necessary consequence of living in a fallen world. In Russia, he writes, this habit of mind has long been fostered by institutional eschatology—whether it anticipates the Kingdom of God or the dictatorship of the proletariat—which becomes an excuse for acquiescing to preventable injustice and suffering, and ultimately relinquishing responsibility for one’s actions.

Miłosz’s purpose in telling the anecdote of the prisoner has less to do with general distinctions of national character than with a narrower argument about literature: The disposition that informs the soldiers’ separation of intention from deed also, he suggests, informs the fatalism and “limitless desire” of 19th-century Russian literature, as well as the maximalist revolution they foreshadowed. Polish literature, by contrast, lacks characters like Dostoevsky’s Prince Myshkin and Alyosha Karamazov, for whom there is “either all good or no good at all.” He concludes that the aspirations of Polish Romanticism were in fact more realist and sober than the aspirations of Russian Realism. In a tradition he traces to the radical sects of the Polish Reformation, the revolutionary ambitions of the Polish Romantics were, he argues, characterized by pragmatic, attainable, humanist goals that were mundane in the most literal sense, since the

58 Ibid., p. 143.
59 Striving Towards Being 28.
most basic of them was the restoration of a physical homeland.\textsuperscript{60} The struggle for a changed world also came more easily to Polish nationalists than to their Russian counterparts, Miłosz claims, since the alien nature of the most apparent evil—the tsarist regime—enabled the Poles to regard their own, patriotic struggle as a universal one.\textsuperscript{61} In other words, if the millenarian but ultimately complacent restlessness of Miłosz’s Russians obscures their embrace of necessity, the terrestrial but purposeful discontent of his Poles represents its utter repudiation. Such a difference means that it is the earthbound Poles whose poetry is most truly “eschatological” as Miłosz defines it in \textit{The Captive Mind}, cited in this chapter’s introduction: “poetry which rejects the present inhuman world in the name of a great change.”\textsuperscript{62}

If any work epitomizes Miłosz’s notion of eschatological poetry, it is \textit{Forefather’s Eve} by Adam Mickiewicz. Its most celebrated passage is the “Great Improvisation,” written shortly after the dismal failure of the November 1830 uprising against Russia. The protagonist Konrad, previously engrossed in an unhappy romantic affair, is now a poet utterly devoted to the Polish cause and a prisoner of the Tsar. His monologue begins in true Romantic fashion by likening his creative power to that of God, but also noting that his art is animated by love instead of the cold rationalism (or “wisdom”) that seems to characterize the Divine order:

\begin{quote}
He lied who called you love; your name
Is wisdom, therein lies your fame.
\end{quote}

Konrad wishes to become “a ruler of souls” through his poetry and his love, so that he may “make my nation’s lot a living song […] of happiness”:

\begin{quote}
Their pain and suffering I feel;
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{60} \textit{Native Realm} 144-45.
\textsuperscript{61} Miłosz makes this comparison in an essay about Apollo Korzeniowski, a minor Russian-born Polish poet and radical. He notes that notionally conflating the struggle for independence with the struggle for a more just world also had the paradoxical effect of making it easier for Polish patriots to ignore endemic Polish social evils. “Joseph Conrad’s Father” in \textit{Emperor of the Earth: Modes of Eccentric Vision}, p. 168.
\textsuperscript{62} \textit{The Captive Mind} 237.
I gaze upon my country fallen on days
Of torment, as a son would gaze
Upon his father broken on the wheel.

God has no reply, just as he has no reply when the biblical Job demands an explanation for his own suffering. Both complaints remind us of Camus’s description of the absurd, “born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world.”63 Provoked by God’s silence, Konrad challenges the Creator’s apparent indifference to his creation:

Speak, or I loose my charge, and if I can
Not shatter nature into shards, yet all your plan
Of wheeling worlds and planets, every star,
Shall rock, as my voice shot throughout creation
From generation unto generation
Shouts you are not the father…

A devil, one of a host of spirits surrounding Konrad, finishes his sentence: “…but the tsar!” and Konrad is prevented from completing his own blasphemous utterance.64 Konrad’s good fortune here is no accident, but a miracle attributable to the intervention of the good spirits battling for his soul in his prison cell.

Miłosz offers a similar, non-fictional depiction of principled, despairing rebellion in an essay on Apollo Korzeniowski, father of the English novelist Joseph Conrad (Konrad Korzeniowski) and a Polish poet and playwright of the late Romantic period.65 Korzeniowski was born into the minor gentry but was a man of the left whose manifestos against capitalist industry and Russian hegemony led to his imprisonment and later deportation with his family to Siberia. From his youth he rejected the brutality of life around him and came to see his own life...

64 Harold B. Segel (ed. & introd.), Polish Romantic Drama: Three Plays in English Translation, 1997 (New York, 2014), pp. 76-81. Translation of Forefather’s Eve is attributed to “various hands.”
65 Miłosz has no doubt about the allusion to Mickiewicz’s protagonist in the son’s name.
“in terms of a struggle against Moloch.” Miłosz senses a continuity of tone between the works of the father and those of Conrad, the author of *Heart of Darkness*, that is rooted in their refusal to accept the world on its own terms. Miłosz notes in passing a distinction that clearly reflects the categories in which he usually thinks of such things: Both men, he writes, adhered to the standard that binds a ship’s crew when engaged in a fight against an external menace; for Apollo, “the crew was the Nation or Europe, the dark element Russia. For Conrad, the crew perhaps signified humanity in its struggle with destiny.” Conrad took up his father’s struggle against necessity, embodied in the imaginations of both men in historical phenomena such as “Progress” and man’s exploitation of man, but the son intuited a deeper, metaphysical dimension of the struggle, one that implicated human nature itself and was mirrored in the darkness of the natural world.

The rebellion of Apollo Korzeniowski in Miłosz’s essay is, like that of Mickiewicz’s Konrad, plainly Promethean in its hopeless defiance of an overwhelming, tyrannical power and in its hero’s empathy for suffering humanity. It was common for the European Romantics to compare modern revolutionaries to Prometheus, whose empathy for man’s frailty leads him to rebel against the tyranny of Zeus. The cult of Prometheus as represented by works like Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* places the figure in the company of Milton’s Satan in his remorselessness and his principled refusal to submit to divine injustice. Yet in a letter to Thomas Merton, Miłosz suggests an important difference between his own Promethean ideal and Shelley’s: “And perhaps Prometheus was not an ancestor of modern revolutionaries, perhaps he was in revolt against a heavy, false God, but not against God the Father?” Even in the context of the letter, the comment is an opaque one. But the contrast between “God the Father” and “a heavy, false God”

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66 *Emperor of the Earth* 178.
67 Ibid., 184.
68 *Striving Towards Being* 51.
suggests something like the Manichaean distinction between a supreme God of light and a lesser
god of darkness; and, following as it does a discussion about determinism in nature and history,
the comment suggests that in Miłosz’s mind Prometheus is in revolt not against the Divine order
itself, but against its evil byproduct, necessity. In his History of Polish Literature Miłosz notes
that Konrad’s imprisonment transforms him from a mere rebel into a fighter for a cause, and one
“not in revolt against Providence.”69 Here the distinction between Providence and necessity is
critical, the former denoting the plan of a benevolent, fatherly God and the latter suggesting the
mechanized motion of a world in diabolical bondage. Even with no evidence that Providence is
at work shaping the fate of modern, suffering Poland, Konrad retains his faith in its invisible,
inscrutable, and benign power. In the essay on Korzeniowski, Miłosz observes that he retained a
similar expectation: “Everything that surrounds me,” Korzeniowski wrote, “bids me doubt the
existence of a divine omnipotence, in which I nonetheless place all my faith.”70 For Miłosz, the
importance of Forefather’s Eve as a foundational work in the modern Polish canon lies only
partly in its hero’s righteous anger; equally significant is the fact that the revolt ends in grace and
with a commitment to act in humble submission to Providence and for the good of men.

5. THE COLLECTIVE AND HISTORY

The development that led most directly to Miłosz’s departure from Poland in 1951, as he
explains in “Nie,” was the realization that his existence there as an officially sanctioned writer
would eventually mean having to conform to the banalities of Socialist Realism. But he also
carefully underscores that his rejection of political propaganda does not mean he is a lover of
recondite art intended for an elect few. Life in German-occupied Warsaw weaned him from the

69 The History of Polish Literature 223.
70 Emperor of the Earth 181.
cul of art for art’s sake, he writes: “A writer’s ambition should be to reach simple, honest people who may never have read Proust or Joyce, yet who suffer problems that are by no means trivial.” A poet’s societal obligations became a pervasive theme in Miłosz’s prose that received its fullest expression in The Witness of Poetry (1983). There he cites his uncle Oscar Milosz, a francophone poet who complained of the impoverishment of European poetry by the legacy of Symbolism and particularly by the figure of the poète maudit (“accursed poet”), which encouraged poets to cultivate an image of extreme, morbid refinement. “This unfortunate deviation,” wrote the uncle, “produced a schism and a misunderstanding between the poet and the great human family, which has continued to the present.” The pursuit of a poetics of “pure lyricism” unencumbered by discourse meaningful to anyone beyond the coterie of fellow poets only aggravated the separation. C. Miłosz shares his uncle’s appraisal and, while acknowledging periodic, localized revivals of civic-minded or philosophical poetry under the influence of historical events, he agrees in The Witness of Poetry that the schism endures, a circumstance he sees reflected in the prejudice that ordinary people cannot understand true art and in the fact that in America, for example, writers and readers of poetry are to be found almost exclusively on university campuses.

Just as the war taught him to reject esoteric art, Miłosz argues that the national crises demanding the attention of Poland’s artists in recent centuries largely inoculated them against the temptations of aestheticism and other literary movements he regards as blind alleys. In a 1989 interview with Joseph Brodsky, Miłosz attributes the absence of a strong Polish absurdist

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71 “Ambicją pisarza powinno być trafienie do prostych, uczciwych ludzi, którzy może nigdy nie czytali Prousta czy Joyce’a, ale których zaprzątają bynajmniej niebłade problemy.” “Nie” 5.
73 Ibid., 26.
74 Ibid., 30.
tradition, for example, to constant “duties toward collectivity” that absorbed Polish artists in the modern era, when scientific and other changes were leading other Western artists to pose corrosive epistemological questions.75 This orientation toward the collective is especially conspicuous in Polish drama, a circumstance Miłosz traces to Jan Kochanowski’s 1578 play The Dismissal of the Grecian Envoys. Several pages of The History of Polish Literature are devoted to Claude Backvis’s analysis of this work and its communal theme, an unusual quality for a Renaissance humanist tragedy. The play dramatizes the fateful Trojan decision to reject the Achaean offer of peace in exchange for Helen’s safe return. At issue are not court intrigues or the passions of individuals, but practical ethics and the consequences of bad statesmanship on the collective fate of Troy itself, which Miłosz regards as the real hero of the drama. Both Backvis and Miłosz consider the work a forerunner of Polish national drama of later centuries. Słowacki and Mickiewicz took up the thread, Miłosz argues, by imbuing their heroes with the ambitions of the group, and Backvis notes the natural continuity in Wyspiański’s use of symbolic forms and characters, since “attitudes and events which decide the fate of a collectivity can be dramatized only by incarnating them in dramatis personae.”76 Miłosz observes later in his History that the symbolic and social character of Polish theater remains strong in the plays of Tadeusz Różewicz, whose characters are “symbols of common humanity, everymen” in the fashion of medieval morality plays.77 The centrality of Forefather’s Eve to the student movement in March of 1968 demonstrates the abiding role of Polish theater as a medium for the enactment of collective drama.

Miłosz sees Cyprian Norwid, a poet of the generation that followed Mickiewicz, as a key figure for the development of this social orientation in Polish poetry. Norwid, as Miłosz stresses

75 Cynthia L. Haven (ed.), Czeslaw Milosz: Conversations (Jackson, MS, 2006), p. 98.
76 The History of Polish Literature 69-73.
77 Ibid., 469.
in his *History*, rejected art for art’s sake, regarding art and labor as acts of communion with the past and seeds of the future, and thus understanding both to be fundamentally moral endeavors.

As a young man, he left Poland for Western Europe and later America, and his assessment of life there is an amplified version of Miłosz’s: Norwid’s stay was, Milosz writes, made unbearable by “what he felt to be the lack of history in America, of the kind that speaks to man through the permanent traces—no matter if they are ruins—left by human hands.”

Miłosz compares him to Herman Melville, who shared Norwid’s suspicion of material progress and industrial civilization, which both men saw as sophisticated means of satisfying base desires. Norwid’s grim urban depictions of Paris and London, he writes, “parallel” those of Melville. But the similarities are more important for the difference they point up. Whereas Melville rejected the hypocrisies of Western civilization in search of a kind of individualistic, pre-Christian innocence, Norwid’s instinctive collectivism led him to find solutions in humanity’s common experience. Milosz formulates the distinction in terms of his own favored categories, writing that if Melville was concerned with the problem of Man and Nature, Norwid was concerned with the problem of Man and History. Norwid was virtually unknown when he died in 1883, but his work was quickly discovered by the poets of the Young Poland movement and his influence grew steadily thereafter. Milosz believes that Norwid’s example served as a belated counterweight to the outsized and enduring importance of the French Symbolists, and he attributes his importance for the poets of Milosz’s own generation to their sense of an impending national cataclysm during the 1930s.

“Norwid’s intense historicism,” Milosz believes, “his refusal to practice a narrowly utilitarian poetry, and, at the same time, his rejection of ‘art for art’s sake’ paved the way for a

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78 Ibid., 269.
79 Ibid., 272-75, 408.
specific kind of literature that meditates on history and art and that is, perhaps, uniquely Polish.”

Whatever claims the values transmitted by Mickiewicz and Norwid had on the moral imagination of Poland’s poets between the world wars, interwar Poland was firmly anchored to cultural Europe, its artists generally sharing the concerns and preoccupations of their Western neighbors. This was utterly changed by the war, which, Miłosz argues, for Poles was a metaphysical—not merely human—disaster. He cites the critic Stanisław Brzozowski: Polish history was long “premised on the near certitude that the world is in appearance a sorrow and in reality a joy.” The Second World War unambiguously refuted the notions that good prevails over evil and that Poland’s fate is guided by the hand of Providence. The implications for Polish history were profound, and the effect on Polish poetry was similarly dramatic. Language recovered the simple function of describing reality, the quality of new work declined even as its propaganda and historical value rose, and the emergence of new stylistic modes was delayed until after the war’s end. Anna Swirszczynska’s early attempts to write about the Warsaw Uprising, for example, are deemed wordy and emotional; it is not until years later that the “miniature” genre developed in these poems would finally succeed. Only in the last years of the war, Miłosz claims, did Polish poetry acquire the irony necessary in order to distance itself from ideology and to begin to grapple with a central problem of his Treatise on Poetry: would it remain as a continuation of what came before, or would it rebel?

Miłosz himself believed the solution lay in rebelling against the modernist currents to which Polish poetry had succumbed, so that it might be restored to the tradition from which it

80 Ibid., 279-80.
81 The Land of Ulro 126.
82 The Witness of Poetry 80-85.
83 A Treatise on Poetry 99-100.
had fallen away. A 1948 essay by Miłosz in the *American Slavic and East European Review* identifies a movement in European poetry away from the excesses of Surrealism toward a more intellectually rigorous “logical-rhetorical” tradition rooted in poetry of the Renaissance and Enlightenment. When he explains that by “logical” he simply means “comprehensible,” it becomes clear that he is taking up his uncle’s argument against the decadent legacy of Symbolism. Evidence of a return to classical aesthetics in Polish poetry could, he writes, be seen in the interest new poets were taking in the technical craft of Mickiewicz, whose power lay first in the most basic elements of his style, simple and dry and grounded in every-day speech.\(^{84}\) In the years that followed, anxiety over the notion of living and writing in exile compelled Miłosz to look deeper and to examine the very meaning of his vocation as a Polish poet. In the 1991 essay “With Polish Poetry against the World” he recalls: “The question I asked myself […] is whether Polish literature contains any special values that lend themselves to a new interpretation, so they could serve a poetry capable of confronting the entanglements of the twentieth century.” He concludes that it possesses two essential elements, confirmed in the character of Polish poetry as it reconstituted itself after the war: “its constant fusion with history,” and “the active participation of the individual in the fate of the collectivity.”\(^{85}\)

Each of these elements, Miłosz claims, is fully manifest in Polish postwar literature. One of them—the poet’s participation in the fate of the collectivity—signifies the end of poetry’s alienation and thus marks the poet’s rejoining the human family. It is not a question of the solidarity that temporarily arises during a shared catastrophe, he notes; the war led to a radical sundering of age-old barriers that were further reduced under communism, and he sees proof of this in things as disparate as high book sales for new poetry in the early postwar decades and the

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\(^{85}\) “With Polish Poetry Against the World” 40.
broad support for the workers’ strike in 1980.\textsuperscript{86} Even as the strength of the resurgent “logical-rhetorical” tradition naturally faded over time and readership inevitably declined, poetry’s cultural influence remained and—Miłosz insisted in 1983’s \textit{The Witness of Poetry}—remains. Thus the continued importance of Polish poetry so many years after the war is taken as evidence that indulging popular taste is not a necessary condition for the poet’s reintegration into society, as long as the poet himself is not alienated—as long as “he speaks as one of the crowd.”\textsuperscript{87} Miłosz concludes that Poland, a major focal point of many of the century’s unique evils, offers a formula for the recovery of European art by demonstrating that “the great schism” can be repaired.\textsuperscript{88}

The other of Miłosz’s two elements—poetry’s constant fusion with history—is said to be similarly revealed in the work of Poland’s poets after the war, who grasped the tragedy of the human condition as an ancient and eternal phenomenon while never losing their sense of their own rootedness in a particular place and time. Earlier in the chapter I cited a passage in \textit{A Treatise on Poetry} noting the death of a snake beneath a car’s wheel, which reminds the reader of humanity’s uncertain place in the natural order. In the lines that follow that passage, Miłosz proposes that history itself, elsewhere noted for its nature-like qualities, offers a solution to man’s struggle with nature:

\begin{verbatim}
I want not poetry, but a new diction,
Because only it might allow us to express
A new tenderness and save us from a law
That is not our law, from necessity
Which is not ours, even if we take its name.
[...] Why cry out
That a sense of history destroys our substance
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{86} \textit{The Witness of Poetry} 31.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 88.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 95.
If it, precisely, is offered to our powers,
A muse of our gray-haired father, Herodotus,
As our arm and our instrument, though
It is not easy to use it, to strengthen it
So that, like a plumb with a pure gold center,
It will serve again to rescue human beings. 89

Here Miłosz exploits the ambiguous meaning of history, defined as both the aggregate of past events themselves—constrained, according to the prophets of the New Faith, by varying degrees of necessity—and the careful study of those events and the narratives we create about them. History, an endnote explains, has become an ideological cudgel to remind us of our subjugation to the forces of determinism. 90 A Treatise on Poetry proposes to turn the weapons of determinism against its generals, reclaiming history as a tool of memory and thus a means of self-knowledge. Literature is called upon to abandon its solipsistic modernist affectations and instead cultivate “a new diction” and “a new tenderness” which, in accepting the determinists’ challenge, would use the self-knowledge gained through the contemplation of history to assert and defend man’s freedom from the law of necessity.

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89 A Treatise on Poetry 51-52.
90 Ibid., 116-17.
Chapter Two - Milan Kundera’s Path to the Large Context of Literature

Bohemistic study describes and interprets Czech literature as a part of Czech national life, Czech national history.\(^1\)

Milan Kundera

Czech literature has no worse enemy than a Bohemicist.\(^2\)

Milan Kundera

When an interviewer asked Milan Kundera in 1964 what must change in order for Czech literature to begin to achieve the kind of international fame already attained by Czech film, Kundera replied:

Every national literature has its “diplomatic corps,” its own “legation”; these are its translators, its foreign specialists who deal with its specific problems (Bohemists, in our case), its international enthusiasts. […] And the fact is that our representation abroad is in a miserable, if not catastrophic, state. […] The only way to change this is through intensive labor under long-term peaceful and stable conditions. Nothing is more crucial to Czech literature than this.\(^3\)

Yet when we think about Kundera’s criticism, when we recall its most enduring themes and the writers who people his essays, we tend to remember Rabelais, Kafka, Musil, Broch, and perhaps a few others. Few subjects or figures come to mind that are unambiguously Czech. Despite the old complaints of Czech critics and readers, there is little reason to believe that this absence can be explained by ill feelings toward his former home. Indeed, while Czech authors do not figure prominently in his nonfiction, his first post-emigration novels shone a spotlight on the political plight of Czechoslovaks, and his warnings against the hegemony of Soviet civilization in essays

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2 Ibid., 10.

This chapter will argue that Kundera’s ostensible neglect of Czech authors in his post-emigration criticism is, paradoxically, entirely consistent with the ideas that motivated his call for a literary “diplomatic corps” in 1964. From his earliest articles in Literární noviny in the mid-1950s to his seminal address to the Czechoslovak Writers’ Union in 1967, Kundera’s central polemic aim was always to rescue Czech literature from its own smallness; to prevent it from disappearing into provincialism and irrelevance in the broader European context, as writers inevitably wrestled with the political and cultural distractions of a century that offered little peace. The problem of negotiating the conflict between demands of the large and small contexts of literature became a personal one for Kundera, given the perceived obligation he owed to writers in his homeland following his emigration. He has praised the example of Josef Škvorecký and Zdena Salivarová, who from the early 1970s devoted themselves to publishing banned Czech and Slovak authors from their home in Toronto, but he never chose such an activist role for himself. Serving Czech literature in this way would have collided with his deep interest in the broader currents of European literature, the very currents he urged it to join in 1964 and earlier.

The second half of the chapter—the final three sections—is devoted to understanding a sharp reversal that Kundera’s rhetoric underwent in the early 1960s. For nearly a decade he had challenged orthodox opinion by advocating for the introduction of intimate themes and subjective modernist devices into “realist” Marxist poetry, a change he claimed to be both dialectically necessary and critical to the creation of readable contemporary literature. In the middle of the 1960s, at roughly the time that he began publishing fiction, Kundera began to

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claim that the “lyricism” that characterized his beloved Surrealism was a mark of cultural backwardness and, as the defining characteristic of the increasingly moribund 1948 revolution, should be abandoned. I argue that Kundera’s efforts both on behalf of lyric poetry and against it are strongly conditioned by his commitment to pushing Czech literature to gain its proper place in the larger context.

1. LARGE CONTEXT, SMALL TASKS

The first work of long non-fiction Milan Kundera published after the 1989 Velvet Revolution, and thus the first that might be freely read by Czechs in the Czech lands (albeit in French), was an argument for the autonomy of art. Testaments Betrayed (Les Testaments trahis, 1993) is a litany of offenses against that autonomy by translators, editors, biographers, and censors. It is also a defense of artists who have aspired to create works that are meaningful beyond their immediate national or linguistic contexts: Hermann Broch, wishing to be likened to fellow modernists James Joyce and André Gide, was instead compared on his publisher’s book jacket to fellow Austrian Hugo von Hofmannsthal, an author with whom he had little in common. Exiled, Polish-born Fryderyk (Frédéric) Chopin earned his renown in Paris only to have his heart excised from his dead body by well-meaning patriots and buried in Polish soil. Following the death of the composer Leoš Janáček—in Kundera’s view, the greatest of Czech artists and one of the great European modernists—the official Czechoslovak cultural guardians drafted him as a symbol of “local concerns” that included Moravian folklore, esteem for Russia, and love of nature.5 Given the hostility of many Czechs toward Kundera’s choice to stop writing in Czech in the 1980s, it is reasonable to detect a personal edge in his complaint against Bedřich

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Smetana’s “bloodthirsty” chorus, written over one hundred years earlier in an era dominated by nationalist feeling: *Rejoice, rejoice, voracious raven, you have a treat in store: soon you will feast on a traitor to our country.* What traitor did the composer have in mind? Kundera explains: “any Czech who decided to leave Prague for Vienna and participate peacefully in German life there.”

Kundera offered a theoretical framework for these complaints in the notion of the *small* and *large contexts of art*. The essay “Three Contexts of Art: From Nation to World,” published the same year, is essentially an argument for a comparative approach to literature:

One who asks about the artistic value of a work asks what new and unique contribution that work has made to our understanding of the world and of human life, what new contribution it has made to the development of artistic form. Such a question automatically leads to a comparison of the work with other works, demanding that we see it against the background of a certain comparative context.\(^6\)

In other words, any discussion about a work’s aesthetic value (as opposed to a discussion about its social usefulness or about what it can tell us about its author) will involve implicit comparisons to other works. Any context suitable for comparing works that derive from different traditions will also include any authors or traditions that may have influenced them. For example, Kundera writes that Lawrence Sterne, Witold Gombrowicz, and the Czech Vladislav Vančura were all influenced by François Rabelais, and together they all belong to the supranational *large context* of the European novel. Rabelais’s own countrymen were blinded to his importance by the parochial concerns of the national or *small context*, which instead traditionally elevated the mediocre Victor Hugo. Thus it was left to the Russian Mikhail Bakhtin—inhabiting the *large context*—to claim the work of Rabelais.

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\(^7\) “Three Contexts of Art: From Nation to World” 6.
context—to “discover” Rabelais for the French. (The “third” context of the title is the regional or median context, represented by e.g. Scandinavia or Central Europe.)

In the 2007 essay “Die Weltiliteratur,” which further develops the theme, Kundera imagines the history of art as a “relay race,” in which the distinct experience of each nation brings value to a given discipline or genre at different times: In the eighteenth century the novel flourished in the hands of the English, who passed the baton to the French, who passed it to the Russians, who passed it to the Scandinavians, etc.

The failure to consider the large context is a problem of large and small nations alike, Kundera writes. Large nations are a world unto themselves and can thus come to believe they have no need for a larger context; small nations regard the large context as something that is “out there” and too great for them to participate in. To ignore the large context is to exaggerate the parochial and the contingent (the social resonance of Hugo’s Les Misérables) in place of what is universal and essential (the laughter of Rabelais’s Gargantua and Pantagruel). “[I]ndifference to aesthetic value inevitably shifts the whole culture back in provincialism. France is not merely the land where the French live; it is also a country that other people watch and draw inspiration from.”

Kundera offers the example of the Czech Structuralist Jan Mukařovský to demonstrate the practical consequences of neglecting the large context: Claiming that Mukařovský’s “theoretic significance” is equal to that of the more celebrated Russian Viktor Shklovsky, he notes that Mukařovský’s analysis of exclusively Czech works made his ideas less comprehensible to the general European reader. (Besides material on Tolstoy and less familiar

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8 Ibid., 7, 11. In the 2007 essay “Die Weltiliteratur,” Kundera reformulates his definitions slightly: a work of art’s small context is “the history of its nation”; a work of art’s large context is “the supranational history of its art.” Here he also endorses Kafka’s observation that, whereas for large nations literature is a matter of literary history, for small nations it is “a matter of the people,” offering them a source of pride. (29-30)


10 Ibid., 31.
Russian authors, Shklovsky’s *Theory of Prose* devotes entire chapters to Cervantes, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Dickens, and Sterne.) Kundera concedes that the national context is important, since it directly shapes an artist and his or her work. The purpose of “Bohemistic study” is to “describe and interpret Czech literature as a part of Czech national life,” and this function is helpful to foreign non-specialists who are unequipped to understand these aspects of a text. But the role of the “Bohemicist” is beneficial only as long as he does not tear the work from its European context and imprison it in the local. When this happens, Kundera concludes, “Czech literature has no worse enemy than a Bohemicist.”

Kundera himself carried out this interpretive function repeatedly throughout the late 1970s and 1980s and even later. In numerous essays, interviews, and prefaces to translated works, he worked to return Czech literature to a European context from which it had been violently torn away, writing with admiration and incisiveness about a range of his contemporaries when their work was unfamiliar abroad and banned or curtailed at home. A representative sample of these texts might include the following:

- The preface to the 1978 French edition of *Mirakl* (The Miracle Game), Josef Škvorecký’s satirical treatment of the Prague Spring. Naturally, this is a subject that other opponents of the regime treated with reverence, and Kundera praises the novel as “the only work that gives a comprehensive account” of the era. Far from abusing the memory of the event, he argues, Škvorecký’s attempt to demythologize it is a faithful tribute to its essential spirit of skepticism.

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11 “Three Contexts of Art: From Nation to World” 9-10. “Die Weltliteratur” is similarly unsparing: “And what about the professors of foreign literatures? Is it not their very natural mission to study works in the context of world literature? Not a chance. In order to demonstrate their competence as experts, they make a great point of identifying with the small—national—context of whichever literature they teach. They adopt its opinions, its tastes, its prejudices. It is in foreign universities that a work of art is most intractably mired in its home province.” (30)

• “Il fallait détruire Candide” (“Candide Had to Be Destroyed”) was published in *Le Nouvel Observateur* in 1979 shortly after Václav Havel was sentenced to four and a half years in prison for subversion. Having accused Havel of exhibitionism ten years earlier, here Kundera praises him as someone whose very life is “a magnificent demystification of language” and who conducts himself “as if words really mean what they are supposed to mean.”

13

• “A Little History Lesson” was published in *Le Nouvel Observateur* and *The New York Review of Books* in 1984 on the occasion of Jaroslav Seifert’s winning the Nobel Prize for Literature. It celebrates Seifert’s generation—“the greatest constellation in the entire history of Czech poetry”—and mourns the absence of his deceased peers Vítěslav Nezval, Konstantin Biebl, František Halas, and Vladimír Holan.

14

• An introduction to a 1986 Italian translation of the novel *Místopis* (*Topography*) by the émigré Sylvie Richterová. Kundera writes that *Topography* performs the novel’s fundamental task of exploring the essence of experience, thus revealing “hitherto
unknown situations which, though hidden, have always been part of human potentialities.”

• Even an anecdote recounted decades after the end of censorship and concerning the legendary Bohumil Hrabal is, in a sense, a defense of a marginalized writer. Hrabal, Kundera explains in 2009 in *Une rencontre (Encounter)*, was beloved by Czech readers before and after the Prague Spring for his limitless fantasy and plebian sensibility. He was also distinctly apolitical, a trait that irritated both the official culture and its opponents. Kundera recalls that when an acquaintance pronounced Hrabal “a collaborator,” Kundera responded with equal fury, declaring that “a single book by Hrabal renders a greater service to human freedom than all of us together with our gestures and our proclamations!”

What these and many texts like them share is a generous, sympathetic assessment of a given author and his or her work and, more importantly, a tendency to underscore the work’s general significance—not as a political pamphlet or as exotic Czech realia, but as art.

Such work on behalf of other Czech writers may be regarded as a kind of latter-day *drobná práce*—the everyday, non-heroic “modest tasks” that Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, the founder of the Czechoslovak state, believed should form the basis for building a moral and humane society. Kundera quickly earned a reputation as a prominent witness of earlier political events in Czechoslovakia and a dutiful advocate of the work of his colleagues and predecessors. An editor’s comment conveys the sense of Western isolation from Czechoslovak intellectual life

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16 “Un seul livre de Hrabal rend un plus grand service aux gens, à leur liberté d’esprit, que nous tous avec nos gestes et nos proclamations protestataires!” Milan Kundera, *Une rencontre* (Gallimard, 2009), p. 131.

in 1983, when Kundera published an essay on Leoš Janáček in the American journal *Cross Currents*: “At a time when the exercise of freedoms in Czechoslovakia is being repressed by judicial travesties, it is very important to hear true accounts of Czech culture.”\(^{18}\) Two years later, Olga Carlisle wrote in *The New York Times Magazine* that Kundera had “done for his native Czechoslovakia what Gabriel Garcia Marquez did for Latin America in the 1960’s and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn did for Russia in the 1970’s. He has brought Eastern Europe to the attention of the Western reading public, and he has done so with insights that are universal in their appeal.”\(^{19}\)

Given the low importance of the *small context* in Kundera’s literary universe, it is not surprising to discover that he had no interest in republishing these texts when they had served their purpose. After 1989, political censorship in Czechoslovakia was abolished, the hegemony of Soviet culture in Europe ended, and the perceived threat to Czech literature suddenly passed. A new edition of Kundera’s *Žert* (*The Joke*) was published by Atlantis in 1991, marking the novel’s first appearance in Czechoslovakia since its original publication in 1967. In a lengthy Author’s Note, Kundera claimed for himself the principle he invokes in *Testaments Betrayed* on behalf of other authors: that a writer is not the guardian of his language or of any national tradition, and that his sole duty is to discover those aspects of human existence that only art is capable of discovering. In preparation for the eventual publication of additional works in Czech, he announced in precise terms which of his authored texts belonged to his approved *oeuvre*, and he declared the rest out of bounds. In addition to his “juvenilia” and anything he considered unsuccessful, the “occasional” (“příležitostně”) pieces described in the paragraphs above are explicitly excluded from future publication. “These texts say precisely what I think, but they

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\(^{19}\) Carlisle, “A Talk with Milan Kundera.”
were written out of love for the cause they served, rather than out of any wish to discover and say
something new. My intention was not to participate in the Czech literary discussion, and so I do
not intend to translate them into Czech or republish them.”

For Kundera, the freeing of Czech culture meant release from a commitment that had, in one way or another, occupied him for
nearly four decades: that of coaxing Czech literature out of the small context of its routines, its
pathologies, and its nostalgias, and into the large context of European literature.

2. A CASE FOR FULL-BLOODED REALISM

In 1948 the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia seized control of the government with
the support of a large portion of the country’s intellectual elite, including the 18-year-old Milan
Kundera.\(^{21}\) As in other satellites of the Soviet Union, the ascension of the Communist Party to
power in Czechoslovakia was followed by the establishment of Socialist Realism as the official
literary doctrine of the state. Surrealism, Poetism, and other artistic movements that had been
vital to Czechoslovakia’s rich, pre-war literary avant-garde were banned as the decadent
expressions of the former bourgeois order. After 1948, publication of new writing decreased by
half, and many prominent authors who chose not to emigrate were compelled to find alternative
means of earning a living, such as translation and writing children’s literature. Unlike in Poland
and other Soviet satellites, the death of Stalin in 1953 and the ensuing “Thaw” did little to

\(^{20}\) “Ty texty vyjadřuji přesně, co si myslím, ale jsou psány spíš z lásky k věci, které jsem chtěl sloužit, než z touhy
objevit a říci něco nového; nechtěl jsem se jimi zúčastňovat české literární diskuse, a nemínil je proto ani překládat
Kundera’s designated “opus” (as of 1991) include all of his published fiction to date, the play Jacques et son
maître (Jacque and His Master) and the 1986 book of essays L’Art du roman (The Art of the Novel). Only one
Czech writer, Jaroslav Hašek (1883-1923), receives more than a passing mention in The Art of the Novel. A
translation in English of the Author’s Note in its entirety may be found in Understanding Milan Kundera: Public
Events, Private Affairs by Fred Misurella (Columbia, SC, 1993), pp. 162-64.

\(^{21}\) Kundera was expelled from the Communist Party in 1950. Although he was temporarily forced to leave the
university, he received his degree in 1952 and published two volumes of poetry before he was reinstated in the Party
in 1956. Misurella, xii.
improve the situation in Czechoslovakia; only in the early 1960s did censorship relax significantly and the liberalization that culminated in the 1968 Prague Spring began to roll slowly into motion.\(^{22}\)

It was not until decades later that Kundera would explicitly frame his discourse in terms of the large and small contexts, yet from his earliest years as a critic he was preoccupied by the effects of political dogma on the health of Czech literature and on its place within the larger European context. He first rose to fame with the book of poems Člověk zahrada širá (*Man, a Broad Garden*) in 1953, followed by the long poem Poslední máj (*The Last May*) in 1955 and the collection *Monology (Monologues)* in 1957. Although in minor ways these poems challenged the thematic and formal conventions of Socialist Realism as they existed in Czechoslovakia at the time, these are generally bland and unremarkable works. Much more significantly, at roughly the same time Kundera began to publish articles in the official organs of the Czechoslovak Writers’ Union (SČSS). Milan Jungmann, later his editor at the SČSS weekly *Literární noviny*, writes that Kundera quickly became a household name, known for a critical approach that was alert to the historical continuities running through contemporary Czech literature and for his warnings against the crippling effects of official interference in Czech art. His essays were influential and widely read, and his speeches at writers’ conferences were in high demand. Kundera, Jungmann writes, was “the best-known spokesman of a wave undermining the borders between socialist and world culture.”\(^{23}\)


One of Kundera’s earliest articles establishes these themes almost by stealth, conspicuously affirming the official rejection of sentimental, “bourgeois” poetry even as he recommends the adoption of its very tropes. In “A Case for Full-Blooded Realism” (“O plnokrevný realismus,” 1955), printed in the SČSS monthly Nový život, Kundera chastises other critics for presenting a false choice between wholesome socialist poetry, with its explicitly political themes, and ostensibly harmful, “intimate” lyric poetry. Such a choice, he writes, leads to a scarcity of poetry on ordinary human themes—something in great demand among young Czech readers—and it paradoxically opens the door to pernicious, unofficial influences. Well-meaning scolds waste their time worrying about “formalist” and “subjective” tendencies, when the real threat is from genuinely “kitschy trash” (a category the article neglects to explain in detail). It is said, Kundera writes,

that groups of young people—not reactionary, and not untalented—are meeting like Christians in the catacombs, where they read morbid, decadent literature by candlelight. These may be extreme cases, but they are also cautionary ones. In general, our youth exhibits a conspicuous tendency toward banality, sentimentality, cheap pleasure […] We must be self-critically aware that our contemporary literature […] fails to satisfy young people’s longing for beauty, causing them to embrace the cheapest or most sensational “beauty” that offers itself. Contemporary Czech literature fails to answer all the questions and respond to the tremors of their emotional lives, and then they seek answers somewhere else, in poetry that infects them with depraved ideas about life and the world.

litertaturu AV ČR. <http://www.slovnikceskeliteratury.cz/showContent.jsp?docId=1286&hl=literarni+noviny+> [accessed 9/15/16]

24 Nový život, a publication of SČSS, was founded in 1949 and was the first literary periodical to serve as a vehicle for official Communist cultural policy. Kundera was among a wave of new contributors during the middle of the decade who represented a broadening of ideological norms and who assumed a critical stance toward official doctrines. “NOVÝ ŽIVOT” in Přibáň et al..

25 “…existují skupinky mladých lidí—nikoli reakčních, nikoli nenadaných—kteří se scházejí jako křesťané v katakombách a čtou si pří červeném světle vybranou dekadentní a morbidní literaturu. Je to pravděpodobně extrémní případ, leč výstražný. Avšak i vcelku existuje u naši mládeže nápadný sklon k banalitě, sentimentalitě, laciné libovosti […]. Ano, musíme si sebekriticky uvědomit, že současná naše literatura […] nedovede uspokojit touhu mladých lidí po krásě a oni pak vbíhají do náruče té nejálnější nebo nejsensačnější „krásy”, která se jim nabízí. Že nedává našim lidem odpověď a ohlas na všechny otázky, problémy a záchvěvy jejich citového života a oni pak tyto
The forthright exploration of human themes such as love, family, and nature, Kundera concludes, is Czech poetry’s “lone road to victory,” since only such poetry “embraces the whole of human life.”

Apart from offering a glimpse into the argument over what constitutes appropriate material for socialist poetry, Kundera’s article is interesting as a variation on what Czesław Miłosz in *The Captive Mind* calls Ketman. Ketman (or *taqiyya*) is an Islamic juridical concept meaning the tactical denial of one’s true faith, but Miłosz applies it in the political context to mean the sly and patient suppression of one’s opinion in conformity to the demands of the times: “[W]riters of the people’s democracies make use of an accepted special style, terminology, and linguistic ritual. What is important is not what someone said but what he wanted to say, disguising his thought by removing a comma, inserting an ‘and,’ establishing this rather than another sequence in the problems discussed.”

Kundera makes the necessary concessions to Marxist aesthetics, acknowledging the danger of the dual bugbears of “formalism” and “subjectivism,” extolling “realism,” and he obscures the boldness of his proposal in the rhetoric of “self-criticism.” He continued to couch his criticism in Marxist language and ideas through the mid-1960s, although the gradual relaxing of the official discourse led to a greater directness that is discernible in his work from one year to the next. While the necessity of affirming “realism”—whether Socialist, Classical, or “Great”—as the cornerstone of Czech art remained constant throughout, Kundera was always willing to make claims of one kind or another on behalf of the modernist movements that had seen Czech literature flourish in first half of the 20th century. The 1968 Prague Spring meant a break from Aesopian language and the art of reading odpovědí a ohlasy hledají mnohdy v takové literatuře a poesii, která do nich infikuje zvracený názor na život a svět.”


26 “Vždyť cesta plnokrevného realismu, jenž objímá celý lidský život, to je jediná větzná cesta poesie.” Ibid., 754.

between the lines, but its quick suppression led finally to the banning of Kundera’s work altogether.

The title of “A Case for Full-Blooded Realism” is itself emblematic of Kundera’s rhetoric during these decades in its emphasis on “fullness” (plnost). The error of settling for a realist poetics that is not “full-blooded” (plnokrevný), Kundera argues, is a failure to understand the socialist project’s true potential. Others may argue that non-heroic, intimate themes are a retreat from battle, but Kundera insists that it is a case of widening the front. Later the same year he published a second article in Nový život, “Arguments Over Our Inheritance” (“O sporech dědických”), that used similar rhetoric to stake a claim to a Czech share in European modernism. Although this article contains no explicit discussion of the larger European tradition, its implicit argument is that Socialist Realism has impoverished Czech literature by diverting it from the European mainstream. At issue here is not the proper material of socialist art, but its proper forms. Kundera argues that the refusal of official Marxist aesthetics to make room for modernism’s contributions is really a failure to recognize the possibilities of socialist art in all of its dialectical complexity. Those modernists nearest to socialist sensibilities—the poets of the soil and the streets—trusted their five senses to reveal objective reality, yet they were unable to depict society in a fully realistic way (“podat plně realistický obraž”). A second modernist current—the reflective, analytical modernism of Rilke and Pasternak, and of Czechs such as Vladimír Holan and František Halas—discovered tools for mediating reality and for conveying complex psychological and existential situations, yet it was rejected for its metaphysical

28 Milan Kundera, “O sporech dědických,” Nový život 12 (1955), pp. 1290-1306. Like much of the era’s socialist criticism, “Arguments Over Our Inheritance” uses “formalist” as a term of general abuse for literature deemed excessively abstract or displaying insufficient concern for social questions. Yet the article itself betrays the unmistakable influence of Formalist ideas, following as it does the evolution of European genres, using Formalist terminology (fabula), and considering a poem’s composition in terms of the “bricks” that make up its structure: “The lines cited amount to, if I may put it this way, one rather ordinary brick, the kind the entire poem is built from.” (“Citované verše představují, abych tak řekl, docela běžnou cíhlu, z jakých je vstavena celá báseň.”) p. 1294. 29 Ibid., 1297-98. My italics.
preoccupations. Only by absorbing what it can from these modernists, Kundera insists, will socialist literature claim its proper inheritance. “Our art, he concludes, “is gradually entering the brilliant epoch of a new classical realism. It is a time when art shall grasp reality in its fullness and wholeness, when it shall ‘address the world’ in its monumental breadth.”

Another characteristic detail of both “A Case for Full-Blooded Realism” and “Arguments Over Our Inheritance” is the emphasis on young minds and future generations of writers. Kundera graduated from the film school of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (FAMU) in 1952, and he remained there as an instructor of world literature for nearly two decades. It was common, particularly in the 1960s, for Kundera to express concern about the state of Czechoslovak education and about the effect of official cultural policy on young people in the arts. In a 1965 forum in Literární noviny, he raises the problem of Czech backwardness with respect to Europe, singling out the educational system. “It’s no accident that these graduates are isolated from ‘broader traditions,’ having no idea about the most basic concepts from antiquity, to say nothing about Christianity, without which European culture is unthinkable.” In 1964 the much younger poet Jiří Gruša published the provocative essay “Verses for the Birds,” in which he suggested that otherwise well-regarded members of the Czech literary pantheon who had debased themselves in the service of Stalinism were unworthy of respect as artists. Kundera was one of many writers to respond, arguing that in an era of reform the authors most in need of rehabilitation are not the victims of repression, but rather those sullied by their association with

30 My italics. “Naše umění zvolna vchází do skvělé historiccké epochy nového klasického realismu. To je údobí, kdy se umění zmocňuje skutečnosti v úplnosti a celistvosti, kdy vyvoluje svět’ v monumentální rozloze.” Ibid., 1305-06.
31 “KUNDERA Milan” in Menclová et al.
32 “[A]bsolventi jsou nikoli náhodou dokonale izolováni od „šířších tradic“, nemají tušení o nejzákladnějších pojmech z oblasti antiky, natož z oblasti křesťanství—jiné velké tradice, bez níž není nesmyslná evropská kultura.” He adds that the university entrance interviews he had witnessed were “appalling.” Jana Lindnerová, “Ztracené v překladu. Aneb co vše se může (ne)ztratit z pera Milana Kundery při cestě na filmové plátno,” Thesis, South Bohemian University at České Budějovice (2013), pp. 75-76. <https://theses.cz/id/38j0ee/Jana_Lindnerova_DP_komplet.txt> [accessed Sept. 15, 2016]
the regime: “The younger generation regards them with disdain. This cannot be blamed on the works themselves, but rather on the years of official endorsement, which severely disfigured them. […] Empty and reductive readings have estranged these works from today’s young people.”

As with “A Case for Full-Blooded Realism,” Kundera’s reply to Gruša demonstrates a persistent willingness to challenge the prescriptive judgments of both conservative and reformist opinion and a varied effort to expand the range of topics and authors available to the public view.

3. TOWARD THE LARGE CONTEXT

*Literární noviny* published Kundera’s essay, “The Grand Utopia of Modern Poetry: Apollinaire and His Legacy” (“Veliká utopie moderního básnictví [Apollinaire a jeho dědictví]”) in July 1964, five months after it published Gruša’s “Verses for the Birds.” “The Grand Utopia” is a tribute to Apollinaire, the father of French Surrealism, but it also devotes considerable attention to Vítěslav Nezval, a leader of the Czech Surrealists and the primary target of Gruša’s essay. Nezval, who in 1964 had been dead six years, was a leading figure in Czech poetry between the world wars, shaping Poetism and Prague Surrealism before breaking with the

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34 Prague was an important outpost of the Surrealist movement in the 1930s. More overtly political than its French counterpart, the Surrealist Group of Czechoslovakia (*Skupina surrealistů v ČSR*) was officially affiliated with the Communist Party from its inception and thrived as an underground movement through the duration of the Second World War. Its roots in Czech Poetism distinguished the Czech movement from the French Surrealists in significant ways, including in its more positive regard for physical reality. The post-war Surrealist leader Vratislav Effenberger explained that “[i]magination does not mean turning away from reality but its antithesis: reaching through to the dynamic core of reality.” P. Hames, “The Film Experiment” in P. Hames (ed.), *The Cinema of Jan Švankmajer: Dark Alchemy* (London, 2008), pp. 8-39 (34). See also “Against the Current. The Story of the Surrealist Group of Czechoslovakia,” Lenka Bydžovská, *Papers of Surrealism* 1, Winter 2003 <http://www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk/papersofsurrealism/journal3/acrobat_files/lenka.pdf> [accessed Sept. 16, 2016]; and Petr Král, *Le Surréalisme en Tchécoslovaquie*, (Gallimard,1983).
Surrealists in 1938 over his endorsement of the Moscow show trials. After the war he actively supported the Communists’ repressive cultural policies, and his own work became abjectly political. Among other things, Kundera’s essay is an acknowledgment that the utopian moment has passed. He writes admiringly of Apollinaire’s utopian optimism about the power of art to produce joy, and he contrasts this with the coercive, official socialist “optimism” of the recent past. He traces the utopian ambitions of French Surrealism, its appeal to Czech poets, and the ultimate “estrangement” of the Czech Surrealist movement from those early, idealistic impulses. In the decades since Apollinaire, Kundera writes, modern art generally has “deviated from its path of joy, merriment, and magic. […] The bloodline of utopian art has ended. Given the experience of fascism, World War II, and the Stalinist cult of personality, it is easy to understand how this happened.”

Kundera’s essay is also an effort to rescue Nezval’s memory from the weight of its historical associations. At its heart is a comparison of Nezval and Apollinaire that underscores Nezval’s timelessness, evoking Kundera’s earlier texts in its valorization of fullness and wholeness. Qualities that set Apollinaire apart from the other Surrealists draw him closer to Nezval: Apollinaire’s “renaissance personality strove for universality and balance. However stubbornly he dabbled in the most variegated experiments,” he believed that to be classical is to be true to one’s time “while not sacrificing anything the Ancients might teach us.” Kundera reminds the reader that Nezval’s work expresses the original character of the socialist project,
not what that project briefly became under Stalin. Nezval, he writes, is inseparably bound to the true Communist movement by the hope that enabled him to create a lyrical hero who is “full, harmonically balanced, exalting in all things, and seeing the world as ‘miraculous’.”

The Stalinist “new man” was a hero narrowly delimited by time and space, characterized by “moralistic paltriness” (moralistická malorysost), “narrowly post-revolutionary conditions,” and the personality cult. Nezval’s “full and whole man” (plný, celý člověk) stands in contrast, characterized by “magnanimity” (velkorysost), “deep time” (dávnost), and humaneness. Kundera continues to press his case for a mature national literature that is itself humane, whole, and magnanimous, and thus equipped to transcend the context assigned by history and geography.

A short survey of titles from Kundera’s contributions to Literární noviny and other journals in the early 1960s (“Provincialism against Art” [1960]; “On the Worldliness of Literature” [1963]; “A Conversation on the Worldliness of Czech Literature” [1964]) suggests a narrowing of focus during this period to an almost exclusive emphasis on the consideration of Czech literature in its larger context. In “What is World Literature,” he criticizes a new history of postwar Czech literature for imprisoning its subject in the context of Czechoslovak political history: “Is a history of literature nothing more than the nation gazing at itself in the mirror?” A literary historian must know that literature “forms its own comparatively autonomous history [...] through which it creates a certain cultural endowment, an intellectual universe that contains an idea about man and his fate [...]” A 1967 interview with Antonín Liehm, an editor at

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37 “…plného, harmonicky rozvinutého, radujícího se z každé věci a vidícího svět jako ,zázařený’…” Ibid., 15.
39 “Cožpak je historie literatury jen jakou v zrcadle opakovanou historii národní společnosti?” “…literatura vytváří svou vlastní relativně samostatnou historii, v níž se nejen odráží společenský vývoj, ale již literatura vytváří pro svou společnost určitě kulturní bohatství, určitý myšlenkový svět, v němž je obsažen názaor na člověka a jeho úděl…” Qtd. in Lindnerová, p.71. Lindnerová writes that “Co je to světová literatura” was published in Literární noviny from the proceedings of a 1963 symposium on Czech and Soviet literature for youth. The literary history book was Patnáct let české literatury [Fifteen Years of Czech Literature] by Jan Petrmichl (Československý
*Lidové noviny,* takes the idea further, arguing that this cultural endowment actually serves a Darwinian function:

Liehm: What if the national principle is an anachronism in the twentieth century, what if our development truly is moving toward the eventual disappearance of small nations? Kundera: A writer is too closely tied to his language to be able to identify with such a development. In such a situation, only one thing is left to him: to create things of such value as to render such a development as unjustifiable as possible.40

The trauma of the twentieth century has retarded the development of Czech literature, Kundera claims, and it now requires time to mature. But the experiences of recent decades are themselves also an asset: “This nation’s journey through fascism, democracy, Stalinism, and socialism contains everything fundamental to our century, and it may enable us to pose more fundamental questions, to create more meaningful myths than can those who haven’t experienced such an anabasis.”41

The most forceful and sustained expression of Kundera’s ambitions for Czech literature came in June 1967 with his keynote address to the Fourth Congress of the Czechoslovak Writers’ Union. The 1967 Congress exposed the latent struggle between the Party’s reformist and doctrinaire wings and in many ways set the stage for the confrontation of 1968. Perceiving an attempt by the Party to usurp its control of *Literární noviny,* the Writers’ Union transformed the meeting into a three-day forum on censorship and Party control over cultural activity. Kundera’s speech betrays the anxieties that would preoccupy him during the 1970s and 1980s, with its

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41 “Příběh tohoto národa mezi fašismem, demokracií, stalinismem a socialismem obsahuje v sobě všechno podstatné, co dělá dvacáté století dvacátým stoletím, a umožňuje nám proto klást možná podstatnější otázky, vytvářet možná smysluplnější mýty než těm, kteří celou tuto politickou anabazi neprožili.” Ibid., 63.
concerns over the nation’s viability and its intermittent exile to Europe’s cultural periphery, yet its spirit is on the whole far more hopeful than anxious and it resonates with a prophetic effusiveness that is surprising from Kundera. As in the Liehm interview, he argues that the Czechs have been dragged from the margins of history into its very spotlight:

Our nation has experienced, I daresay, more than many others have in this century and, if its genius has been alert, it will now know more than the others. This greater knowledge may prove to be that liberating transcendence of old limits, that crossing of the boundaries of traditional wisdom about Man and his destiny which could confer upon Czech culture a meaning, maturity and greatness. So far these are only prospects, possibilities—but perfectly realistic ones, as many a work created during the past few years has shown. What is at stake is the Czechs’ very existence as a nation in a shrinking world increasingly subject to the leveling forces of popular culture and great-power hegemony. The choice in the nineteenth century to revive the Czech language, rather than harnessing national creative energy to the flourishing German culture, represented a wager, “a great challenge to the future” that requires devotion of the national spirit to noble activities of universal value. Cultural production means preparing for the moment when the world “will quite rightly ask us to present our accounts and justify the existence we have chosen for ourselves.” Such an accounting requires an art whose value is measurable by what it contributes to Europe and to humanity itself. Thus “it is upon the standard of Czech literature, its greatness or meanness, its courage or cowardice, its provincialism or its universality, that the answer to the nation’s existential question largely depends, namely: Is its survival worthwhile? Is the survival of its language worthwhile?”

Kundera’s assessment of the decade’s Czech and Slovak literature here is very positive, judging the previous four years to be the most important in Czechoslovak literature since before

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43 Ibid., 169, 173, 176.
the war. His own *The Joke* (Žert, 1967), published the same year as the Congress, was one of the era’s many novels to confront the recent past. Yet the philosopher and critic Květoslav Chvatík believes that it transcends the usual confines of this subgenre, noting that Kundera’s appraisal of the era is essentially anthropological, rather than narrowly ideological, and he places the novel’s criticism of language and of the possibilities of modern communication within the context of Post-structuralist theory. To Chvatík, “it is no coincidence” that the novel appeared at roughly the same time as Foucault’s *Les mots et les choses* (1966) and he notes that *The Joke*, while rooted in the highly particular experience of Stalinism, “poses on the basis of this experience questions of a much more general, European significance.” The conformity of Chvatík’s assessment to the task outlined by Kundera in the Congress speech reminds us that Kundera must have believed that his own work had a share in the responsibility to address broader, civilizational concerns that he assigns to the national literature in general.

That *The Joke* would reach a readership well beyond his countrymen is something Kundera could take for granted. By the time he had finished writing the novel in 1965, his play *Majitelé klíčů* (*The Owners of the Keys*, 1962) had been translated into half a dozen languages and performed abroad in three countries, and stories from the first volume of *Směšné lásky* (*Laughable Loves*, 1963) had been translated and published in French and Estonian. *The Joke* is rich in realistic historical details, its verisimilitude grounded in the specificity of Stalinist Czechoslovakia, and in this respect it shares little with Kundera’s later, more post-modernist works. Although much of this detail seems designed to appeal to the memory of the Czech or Slovak reader on a visceral level, there are also numerous, often lengthy passages of expository information that serve no other purpose than to render the story comprehensible to the reader.

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unfamiliar with Czechoslovak realia and history. Subjects of such passages include the rebirth of the Czech literary language during the nineteenth century, the army’s “black baron” units during the 1950s, and the status of Julius Fučík’s *Reportáž, psaná na oprátce* (*Notes from the Gallows, 1945*) as “the sacred book” of the same era. Consequently, the novel could be read differently but meaningfully by foreign and native readers, the former equipped with essential information about Fučík’s memoir, for example, and the latter conscious of an extra layer of irony, aware that the discussion of the Fučík cult occurs against the backdrop of Kundera’s own 1955 encomium to the hero.46

For Kundera, the 1968 Prague Spring initially meant the vindication of the old existential wager he describes in his address to the Writers’ Union Congress. After a Soviet-led invasion brought it to a sudden end, he continued to repeat his Congress thesis and even seemed to believe that a period of subjugation was a fair price to pay if it would bring a deepening understanding among Czechs of their historical mission.47 Within just over half a year, however, all hope of rescuing the legacy of the reforms had been crushed, and a chastened Kundera abandoned his assertions about their importance. A number of texts written following his emigration attest to his continued belief that the active promotion of Czech writers abroad was an important condition of the restoration of an autonomous Czech culture. In time he returned to a modest version of the notion that the Czech (and, generally, Central European) experience is in a unique position for demonstrating essential truths about European civilization.48 Yet his 1985 interview with Olga Carlisle demonstrates that Kundera was by then discouraged by the longevity of the

46 Kundera’s second publication, *Poslední měsíc* (*The Last May*, 1955), is a dramatic long poem about the final hours of the Communist martyr Julius Fučík at the hands of the Nazis.
Soviet occupation and, when confronted with his own ideas, he reacted with skepticism and evident fatigue:

Carlisle: It is sometimes said that, paradoxically, oppression gives more seriousness and vitality to art and literature.

Kundera: Let us not be romantic. When oppression is lasting, it may destroy a culture completely. Culture needs a public life, the free exchange of ideas; it needs publications, exhibits, debates and open borders.49

Kundera concedes to Carlisle that Czech literature—both sanctioned and unsanctioned—written in the 1970s was “magnificent,” naming Hrabal, Gruša, and Škvorecký, and noting that it was at the time of its greatest danger that Czech literature finally gained an international reputation. But he is skeptical of the chances for a literature free of hectoring moralism to survive forty years in the desert.

4. THE LYRICAL EPIC OF VLADISLAV VANČURA

What is the proper place of “lyricism” in the Czech national tradition? The question points to a contradiction at the center of Kundera’s efforts on behalf of Czech literature.

Kundera’s complicated relationship with poetry is well known, and he makes no secret of the fact that the novel Life is Elsewhere (Život je jinde, 1979) represents something of a reckoning with his own early career as poet, a calling he gave up completely before he began writing fiction. In the 1950s and early 1960s, Kundera reminded readers that “subjective” modes and methods had been crucial to the Czech avant-garde, and he argued that it was acceptable and even important to inject a measure of lyricism into contemporary Czech poetry. A sharp reversal occurred in the 1960s: Kundera began to view the lyrical mode as fully anathema to the future

49 Carlisle, “A Talk with Milan Kundera.”
success of Czech literature, and he began to argue as energetically for its retirement as he had for its cultivation. The detail that remained constant throughout, however, was his conviction that the advancement or rejection of the lyrical attitude was critical to the forward movement of Czech literature. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to exploring the place of lyrical subjectivity in Kundera’s efforts to move Czech literature toward the large context.

The question of subjectivity was of fundamental importance to Kundera’s early arguments for broadening the range of acceptable themes and forms in Czech literature. Marxism demanded a literature that shared its pretensions of empiricism, and so it was also necessary that it repudiate—or at least mute—styles that favored the expression of private feelings and methods that relied on individualized perception. Apart from the fact that such things were alien to the officially sanctioned style, they were associated with Modernist currents, such as Expressionism, that were regarded as decadent and bourgeois. In his early essays, Kundera promoted the idea that a mature socialist literature should naturally reject such prejudices and should adopt any methods that offered tools for depicting the fullest range of human experience. Hence the arguments in “A Case for Full-Blooded Realism” for the acceptability of “subjective” genres, including love and nature poetry, and in “Arguments Over Our Inheritance” for the usefulness of devices that convey the subjective, fragmentary nature of that experience. In Kundera’s 1961 full-length critical work *The Art of the Novel (Umění románu)*, subjectivity—or “the lyrical” (*lyrično*)—becomes a pillar of his theory on the development of the Czech modern novel. (This book should not be confused with Kundera’s collection of essays and interviews written in French twenty-five years later and also titled *The Art of the Novel [L’art du roman, 1986]*.)

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50 The full title of the first work, which grew out Kundera’s graduate thesis on Vladislav Vančura, is *Umění románu, cesta Vladislava Vančury za velkou epikou* [The Art of the Novel: Vladislav Vančura’s Path in Search of the Great Epic] (Československý spisovatel, 1961).
Kundera’s arguments in all of the critical texts mentioned above plainly rely on readings of the Marxist critic György Lukács. Lukács joined the ill-fated government of Imre Nagy during the 1956 Hungarian Revolution and was lucky to escape its aftermath with his life, a fact that explains why The Art of the Novel contains only a single, insignificant reference to Lukács (the Nový život articles contain none). Lukács is important to Kundera first for the theoretical framework he provides, traceable primarily to Lukács’s The Theory of the Novel (which itself is rooted in Hegel’s aesthetics). According to Lukács, the Homeric epic depicts a world of authentic, closed “totality” in which meaning was immanent to life and the subject-object divide did not yet exist. “The novel,” Lukács writes, “is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem.” In its formal resemblance to the epic, the novel thus represents an attempt to recover that lost meaning. It is Lukács’s theory that supplies the subtitle for Kundera’s The Art of the Novel—“Vladislav Vančura’s Path in Search of the Great Epic” (cesta Vladislava Vančury za velkou epikou).

Lukács is also important to Kundera in his role as a defender of the European realist novel, which he regarded as the only tradition capable of forming a basis for socialist literature in the twentieth century. While Lukács accepted modernism’s successes as necessary stages in literature’s development and as containing innovations with certain limited value, he opposed it as inadequate to the tasks of representing and confronting objective reality and overturning the capitalist order. “Realism in the Balance,” a polemic against Expressionism written in 1938, targets those elements of modernism that fail to properly contrast subjective experience and

51 According to Fred Misurella, Kundera has said that he wrote The Art of the Novel between 1954 and 1956 (Misurella, 162). It is reasonable to speculate that the academic study, written before the uprising, may have addressed Lukács more directly and that Kundera chose to remove the explicit references to Lukács for publication.

objective reality: “If literature is a particular form by means of which objective reality is reflected,” Lukács writes, “then it becomes of crucial importance for it to grasp reality as it truly is, and not merely to confine itself to reproducing whatever manifests itself immediately and on the surface.” It is only “by abandoning and transcending the limits of immediacy, by scrutinizing all subjective experiences and measuring them against social reality” that a writer can achieve a critical distance from the prejudices of reactionary ideas.\footnote{Georg Lukács, “Realism in the Balance,” 1938, transl. Rodney Livingstone, in \textit{Aesthetics and politics}, Ernst Bloch et al., transl. \& ed. Ronald Taylor (London, 1980), pp. 28-59 (33, 37).}

Kundera agrees with the basic premises of Lukács’s theory of the novel, and he echoes his regard for the realist tradition and its importance as a basis for socialist literature. Yet Kundera’s arguments in favor of embracing “subjectivist” modernist methods, which overtly polemicize with Party orthodoxy over the dangers of “decadent” modernist influences, also clearly represent a disagreement with Lukács. \textit{The Art of the Novel} takes this disagreement even further by proposing a theory for the modern Czech novel that is in fact rooted in the foregrounding of the lyrical subject.

Vladislav Vančura (1891-1942), the subject of \textit{The Art of the Novel}, was an exceptionally inventive interwar Czech writer whose fiction combined elements of Expressionism and Dadaism with those of the traditional European realist novel. His highly lyrical style is notoriously difficult to translate and features a strong authorial voice and a rich mixture of archaisms, colloquialisms, and figurative language. Vančura’s novels are not overtly political, but he was a devoted Communist and was executed by the Nazis for activities on behalf of the Czech National Revolutionary Committee. Kundera introduces his study by explaining that he undertakes it as a “practitioner”—that is, as a writer of fiction—rather than as a literary historian, but that the greatness of his subject compels him to place him against the backdrop of the
development of the “world novel.”\textsuperscript{54} Like Lukács, Kundera regards the historical realism of novelists such as Sir Walter Scott and Honoré de Balzac as revolutionary despite their work’s patent aristocratic sympathies, since their treatment of the material demonstrates the possibility of dramatic historical change. The period that followed was typified by Flaubert’s pallid “chamber” novels, Kundera writes, a time of social and artistic malaise that accompanied the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie. The late capitalist era in which Vančura found himself was marked by numbing anxiety and the absence of monumental figures and actions, leaving the epic novel in a state of crisis.\textsuperscript{55}

Kundera begins \textit{The Art of the Novel} with lengthy plot synopses of two “social” novels, Balzac’s \textit{Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes} (\textit{The Splendors and Miseries of Courtesans}, 1847) and Vančura’s \textit{Pekař Jan Marhoul} (\textit{The Baker Jan Marhoul}, 1924). The stark contrast in content and storytelling is said to demonstrate that differences in “social material” offer “differing opportunities for epic treatment.”\textsuperscript{56} Balzac’s novel, which depicts the period preceding the revolutions of 1848, belongs to a “classical” era naturally suited to its romantic intrigue and dizzying plot twists; Vančura’s novel tells the uneventful story of a simple baker whose kindheartedness leads him into bankruptcy and an early death. Vančura, Kundera argues, rejects dramatic tension and suppresses all private intrigues in order to foreground the opposition between the passive victim Marhoul and the anonymous capitalist system that crushes him.\textsuperscript{57} Vančura’s monumental and emotive style is an instrument for overcoming the modesty of his material, raising his prose to the level of poetry. “For Vančura, the \textit{lyrical} is a means of escaping the crisis of the epic and of restoring the epic’s lost greatness and pathos, the lost drama of its

\textsuperscript{54} Umění románu 7.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 21-22.
\textsuperscript{56} “Různá společenská látka poskytuje tedy různé příležitosti pro epické zpracování.” Ibid., 15.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 27-28.
exploits, of its conflicts and collisions. It is a means of endowing the sad and static tale of an impoverished baker with a singular magnificence.”

For Kundera, the foregrounding of the lyrical subject also justifies what he admits is a narrow gallery of character “types” peopling Vančura’s novels. An epic, Kundera notes, is usually inhabited by a rich assortment of characters, as in the novels of Balzac or Tolstoy. Vančura’s characters, however, are mostly either “carefree, joyful drinkers of life, bold and robust fellows in love with the world’s beauty,” or they are the very opposite, “milksops and philistines with the lukewarm blood of a snapweed.” Kundera marshals Hegel, “the latest findings” of Marxist aesthetics, and the theories of the semiotician Jaroslav Volek in order to conclude that Vančura’s characters are an expression of the authorial subject, “living, breathing shadows of his alter ego, beings conjured from his great poetic desire”; and that his fiction itself is a “subjective epic, the self-expression of the authorial subject, one so objectivized that it remains in full accord with the rules of epic art.”

Leaving aside the arcane and ultimately unimportant question of Vančura’s genetic/generic blueprint, what is most interesting about Kundera’s ruminations is that they lead to the following surprising conclusion: The tendency toward authorial self-expression in Vančura’s novels is nothing less than a mark of its Czech-ness—it is “the very feature through

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58 “Je tedy pro Vančuru lyrično prostředkem, jímž se vymaňuje z krize epiky a jímž chec vrátit epickému umění ztracenou velkost a ztracený pathos, ztracenou strnost činů, konfliktů a srážek. Jímž obdaří smutný a pasivní příběh zbídačovaného pekaře nevidanou velkolepostí.” Ibid., 30-31.

59 “…je to představa bezstarostného, radostného pijuče života, člověka odvažného, robustního, jemuž vždy v žilách renesanční krev.” “…lidé říčasofitní, filistrovští s vlažnou krví netýkavec.” Ibid., 106, 98. Kundera notes the archetype’s resemblance to Vančura’s friend Vítěslav Nezval. It should be noted that it also has a good deal in common with the rakish protagonists of Kundera’s own collection of short stories, Směšné lásky (Laughable Loves), the first volume of which was published shortly after The Art of the Novel.

60 “…jsou to živoci, barevné stíny jeho druhého já, jsou to vysněné bytosti jeho velké básnické touhy.” “Vančurova próza má charakter subjektivní epiky, která je sebevyjádřením autorova subjektu, ovšem sebevyjádřením tak objektivisovaným, že se neocítá v podstatném rozporu se zákony epického umění.” Ibid., 106.
which Vančura’s work expresses its fundamental belonging to the specific tradition of Czech literature.”

Our national literature arose as a latecomer in the nineteenth century, and it arose primarily as poetry. Čelakovský’s Ohlasy, Mácha’s Máj, Erben’s Kytice, and then the poetry of Havlíček and Neruda. Ever since and almost to the present, Czech literature has been characterized by the rather extraordinary primacy of poetry. […] The great objective epics, the sweeping social novels had few opportunities to arise and develop—and never very persuasively—until the end of the last century. And so the strongest, the classic works of Czech literature have a markedly subjective character.

It should be noted that lyricism is only one aspect of Kundera’s lengthy study, which makes a claim for Vančura’s significance as a member of the European avant-garde on broader grounds than are discussed here. Given the length of the book (206 pages), it is unexpected when Vančura all but disappears from Kundera’s criticism after its publication in 1961.

5. THE CAESURA

There is a passage in Kundera’s second Art of the Novel (L’art du roman, 1986) in which he marvels at Kafka’s choice to transport the mechanical, banal abstraction of the modern office into “the realm of the fantastic.” Kafka “transformed the profoundly antipoetic material of a highly bureaucratized society into the great poetry of the novel; he transformed a very ordinary story of a man who cannot obtain a promised job (which is actually the story of The Castle) into myth, into epic, into a kind of beauty never before seen.” This sentence is remarkable for its

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61 “Právě tímto rysem vyjadřuje Vančurovo dílo svou bytostnou přínáležitost k specifické tradici české literatury.” Ibid., 106.
resemblance to Kundera’s very similar observation in the original *Art of the Novel (Umění románu*, 1961), discussed above, about how Vančura managed to endow the unpoetic story of a poor baker with epic greatness. The crucial difference between the two situations lies in the means by which Kafka is said to have achieved the transformation. Vančura’s accomplishment was stylistic, imbuing Marhoul’s story with lyrical pathos and saturating it with the authorial voice. But Kafka, in recognizing the “phantasmic nature” of the modern bureaucracy and its importance to man’s condition, “saw what no one else could see.”

The parallelism between the two passages, appearing in the two identically named books, is probably accidental. The 1986 *Art of the Novel*, a very different book from the first, is a collection of essays and interviews that contemplate the work of a number of European novelists and formulate a loose theory of the modern novel as a phenomenological inquiry into man’s “forgotten being.” But a comparison of the two passages is a convenient and illuminating symbol of a permanent change that occurred in Kundera’s criticism, in his art, and, it appears, in his thinking about art generally sometime between the publication of his final book of poems in 1957 and his first book of short stories in 1963. 1963 also happened to be the year in which the works of Kafka, which had been banned for a decade, were discussed openly at the Conference of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences. In retrospect, the Kafka conference is widely viewed as the catalyst for the quiet but meaningful cultural liberalization that occurred in Czechoslovakia in the mid-1960s. More directly, it brought the author’s work for the first time to the attention of a new generation of young writers. It was not until after Kundera emigrated a decade later that Kafka would begin to play a prominent role in his writing on modernism, but

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this period is a watermark in his development as a writer in a number of respects, perhaps most conspicuously in his approach to the notion of lyricism.

Kundera’s switch from writing poetry to writing fiction, which occurred sometime during the second half of the 1950s, is an especially critical moment in his personal mythology and one closely associated with the change in his relationship with lyricism. In 1984 he told Jean-Pierre Salgas that he had quickly begun to detest many of his former ideas and postures when he began writing fiction: “I think that every new novelist is born over the demolished house of his lyricism. So I demolished my lyricism! I was a little more than 25 years old. This was my ‘halftime,’ my life’s caesura. Everything that happened before it is for me a prehistory and is of interest only for the knowledge it gives me about myself.”\(^{65}\) Shortly after the first volume of Směšné lásky (Laughable Loves, the collection of short stories) was published in 1963, Kundera was interviewed by Host do domu, which asked whether he believes there is any other sort of love than “laughable love.” His reply contains the seed of his theory of “the lyrical attitude” that is at the rhetorical heart of the novel Život je jinde (Life is Elsewhere, completed in 1969): “No one sees the world as laughable if he has merged with it completely. And in order for someone to see himself as ridiculous, he must step back. It takes time for a person to reach a place from where he can see the humor in life; I suppose it’s a kind of reward that comes with maturity.”\(^{66}\)

As discussed earlier in this chapter, Kundera’s calls for writers to aspire toward “worldliness” grew louder as the 1960s progressed. At the same time, he continued to espouse the notion that Czech literature, the latecomer to Europe, was marked by a youthful bias for

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\(^{65}\) “[J]’ai très vite commencé à détester mes attitudes et mes exercices lyriques. Je pense qu’un romancier naît toujours sur la maison démolie de son lyrisme. Alors, j’ai démolî mon lyrisme! J’avais un peu plus de 25 ans. Cette période est le mi-temps de ma vie, sa césure. Tout ce qui s’est passé avant est pour moi une prêhistoire, qui n’a d’intérêt que pour la connaissance que je peux avoir de moi-même.” “Kundera lit de préférence les philosophes,” an interview with Jean-Pierre Salgas, Quinzaine Littéraire 411 (Aug. 1984), pp.16-17.

\(^{66}\) “Nikdo nemůže vidět svět jako směšný, pokud s ním beze zbytku splývá. I k tomu, aby člověk sám sebe viděl v proporcích směšnosti, musí od sebe poostoupit. Na ono zázračné stanoviště, z něhož je vidět směšné, dostává se člověk až během let; je to snad jakási odměna za dospělost.” Interview, Host do domu 9 (1964), p. 36.
poetry and an attendant subjectivity. Yet the meaning of this youthful bias had changed for Kundera. When asked about the state of Czech literature in 1964, Kundera replied that the modern Czech nation was still waiting for its moment of “self-discovery.” National self-awareness is a precondition for great literature, he said, noting with approval the Russian discovery of the “superfluous man” during the nineteenth century. In the 1967 Liehm interview preceding the Writers’ Congress, Kundera explored at length the conceit that Czech literature was mired in a state of prolonged adolescence:

Lyricism is a means of self-expression, it contains the narcissistic principle. A person becomes an adult when he outgrows his “lyrical age.” It is a little alarming if someone remains a lyricist and nothing but a lyricist his entire life. [...] Take our literature, which is a primarily lyrical one. Its greatest figures were poets, and this is typical for young cultures. But when a national culture reaches maturity, its lyrical dependence becomes a kind of childishness.

He adds, rather implausibly: “Not long ago I was leafing through a handbook on gallbladder diseases, and even that was full of poetry!” What in the Vančura monograph had been a mark of positive distinction—and even the legitimate foundation for a national style—was becoming an accusation of youthful callousness, of self-absorption nurturing a state of permanent backwardness.

Kundera’s most familiar exploration of the lyrical attitude is certainly the novel Life Is Elsewhere, which he completed in 1969. The title itself represents a brief history of modern lyrical revolt: the words are popularly attributed to Rimbaud (“La vraie vie est ailleurs.”), they were repeated by André Breton in his 1924 Surrealist Manifesto, and they became a slogan of

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the French students during the demonstrations of May 1968. Life Is Elsewhere is the story of Jaromil, a young Czech poet during the early post-war years, “the last brief European period when the poet still played his great public role.” His mixture of precocious talent and intellectual complacency embodies the immaturity of his era, and his enthusiasms epitomize those of generations of European poets who precede him. He quickly joins the Communist Party after the 1948 coup d’état, regarding the Surrealist poetry he writes to be of a piece with his revolutionary convictions. Soon, however, his yearning to distinguish himself from his peers and merge with the genius seculti impels him to embrace Socialist Realism, invoking Rimbaud’s maxim that “it is necessary to be absolutely modern.” By the end of the novel, Jaromil demonstrates his authenticity by denouncing his lover’s brother to the secret police, heralding an era ruled, in the narrator’s words “hand in hand by the hangman and the poet.”

Real (non-fictitious) poets appear throughout the novel, often summoned through chains of metonymic substitution that transform, for example, Jaromil’s writing desk into that of the revolutionary poet Jiří Wolker. Others merely serve as subjects for the narrator’s expository asides. These include Konstantin Biebl, an original member of Nezval’s Surrealist Group and a poet whose work Kundera loved. Biebl is also important to Kundera for the symbolic resonance of his career—like many poets of his generation, he abandoned Surrealism for Socialist Realism. In 1950 Zaviš Kalandra, a Czech literary critic and a close associate of the Surrealists, was

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69 Maria Němcová Banerjee notes that Life Is Elsewhere was completed on the eve of the centennial of the Paris Commune, which the popular imagination linked to the political movements of 1968 in Paris and Prague. She discusses “the lyrical attitude” at length in the chapter “Life Is Elsewhere, or Poetry and Revolution” in Banerjee, Terminal Paradox: The Novels of Milan Kundera (Grove Weidenfeld, 1992), pp. 74-105 (79).
71 Ibid., 270.
72 In an interview with Normand Biron, Kundera claimed that Wolker’s life served as an inspiration for the character Jaromil. Normand Biron, “Conversation with Milan Kundera,” trans. Victoria Nelson, Threepenny Review 24 (1986), p. 11. When Wolker (1900-1924) died of tuberculosis at the age of 23, the cult that grew around his memory was so great that the poets Artuš Černík, František Halas, and Bedřich Václavek published the short article “Dosti Wolkera!” (“Enough about Wolker!”) in Pásmo for the first anniversary of his death. The article may be viewed online here: <http://www.ucl.cas.cz/edicee/data/antologie/avantgarda/AVA2/2.pdf>
placed on trial and hanged as a Trotskyist. Kalandra was publicly denounced by his friend, the former Surrealist and devoted French Communist Paul Éluard, and it was Biebl who broke the news of this betrayal to the young Kundera. A year later Biebl jumped from a window, and Kundera dedicated his first book of poetry to him, a gesture that he says began his long dispute with the pharisees of ideological purity. Biebl’s cautionary role in the evolution of Kundera’s aesthetics is addressed in Testaments Betrayed, where he is described as “an exquisite poet” in whom Kundera “saw modern art betrayed, cuckolded, martyred, assassinated, self-destroyed.” His example dramatizes the conflict that emerged between Kundera’s love for “the works of modern art” and his scorn for “the spirit of the avant-garde,” a conflict that would lead him to seek poetic qualities in “the unillusioned territory of the novel.”

Kundera began writing Life Is Elsewhere during the first half of 1968, and he draws an explicit connection between the events of 1948 and 1968 when he depicts a group of Czech university students shouting down an old poet in 1948. The poet departs and is mysteriously transported through space and time to the Paris Sorbonne in 1968, where the slogans on the walls are identical to those scrawled on those he had just left in 1948 Prague. All of it, the novel implies, belongs to the lyrical mode. Kundera returned to the subject of the 1968 Paris strikes years later in his French preface for Škvorecký’s Mirakl, this time contrasting them to the simultaneous events in Prague. According to Kundera, the almost unanimous approval of the Prague Spring by the Western left is based on a misunderstanding that places it beside the Paris events as though they were two analogous battles belonging to a single struggle. While the Paris revolt was an “explosion of revolutionary lyricism,” he explains, the Prague Spring was the result of a long, measured period of liberalization prepared by critical thinking that deconstructed

74 Testaments Betrayed 158-59.
75 Life Is Elsewhere 172.
the dogmas of the previous (1948) revolution. It was a “passionate defense of the European
cultural tradition in the broadest and most tolerant sense of the term,” and its exponents regarded
the radical excesses of the French youth with bemused condescension.76

6. SURREALISM IN THE MEDIAN CONTEXT

In 2007 in “Die Weltliteratur,” Kundera recalls a time when he began to notice that the
term “modern art” did not have the same meaning for his French friends that it had for him. For
the French, he writes, modernism was something “anti-rationalist, anti-classicist, anti-realist,
anti-naturalist”; whereas for Kundera, a Czech, modernism meant a reaction against the
Romanticism that had prevailed in Central Europe in the previous century. Each of these
modernisms is notable for what it opposes, since modernism is above all about casting off the
past, and each tradition revolts against its particular past. For the French, it was a revolt against
the rationalism of the French Enlightenment and its nineteenth-century fruits; for the Central
Europeans, it was a revolt against Baroque ecstasy, Biedermeier kitsch, and sentimental excess.
The French, having dominated nineteenth-century realist fiction, now had little use for the novel,
and the Central Europeans had similar feelings about poetry. “It was not a disagreement,”
Kundera stresses, “it was, quite modestly, the recognition of a difference between the two
traditions that had shaped us.”77

Of course, Kundera elides the story of his own youthful francophone bias (one that
characterized the whole of Czechoslovak culture between the wars) when he assigns himself
fully to the Central European camp. The discovery of the different modernisms reflects his own
discovery of Kafka and the modernist Central European novelists and not a brush with French

77 “Die Weltliteratur” 33.
poetic culture, which had in many ways been his own. Whether his first encounters with Kafka, Broch, Musil, and Gombrowicz followed his break with his earlier preferences or precipitated it, these “poets of the novel” became central to his understanding of his own art, and their “exasperation with the lyrical” closely resembles his own. They were

impassioned by the [novel’s] form and by its newness; concerned for the intensity of each word, each phrase, seduced by the imagination seeking to move beyond the borders of “realism” but at the same time impervious to seduction by the lyrical; hostile to the transformation of the novel into personal confession; allergic to the ornamentation of prose; entirely focused on the real world. They, all of them, conceived the novel to be a great antilyrical poetry.\(^78\)

Kundera would eventually write exclusively in the language of his emigration, while loyally continuing to write reviews and book prefaces for his Czech colleagues when they were able to publish abroad. But he also developed a loyalty to the “median context” of the Central European novel and to its themes.

One of the prefaces stands out for the way in which Kundera manages to thread the needle of his diverse loyalties, old and new. It introduces the 1983 French publication of *The Ceiling*, a new novel by the Czech poet and novelist Pavel Řezníček. In an interview with the journal *Quinzaine Littéraire* the previous year, Kundera had described Prague’s artistic culture as a synthesis of its phantasmagoric Baroque roots—the very irrationalism the Central European modernists wished to escape—and the passion for analysis and demystification that came to characterize those modernists.\(^79\) In the preface to *The Ceiling* Kundera explains that Řezníček is a “son, or rather a grandson, of Surrealism,” and was once arrested as an adolescent for replacing

\(^{78}\) Ibid., 34.

a street sign with one reading “Rue André Breton.” But he warns that it is necessary to avoid a few misunderstandings and, in a manner similar to his analysis of the Prague Spring in the preface for Škvorecký’s *Mirakl*, he proceeds to parse the differences between Surrealism as understood by the French and the surrealism of Řezníček.

First, while Surrealism is remembered in France more for its ideology than for its poetry, the surrealism of Řezníček is fiercely anti-ideological. It is “all power to the imagination!” not as a slogan scrawled on the walls, but as “an artistic reality that could not be more concrete,” dazzling the reader with the outburst of Řezníček’s fantasy. Second, if French Surrealism was obsessed with the promise of the future, Řezníček’s surrealism is disabused of all illusions and foresees not a utopia but an apocalypse. Thirdly, Řezníček is heir to the vulgar laughter of Jaroslav Hašek and, true to the Central European Baroque, his fantasy is earthy and plebian. How can we still call this Surrealism? Kundera asks. Because it remains true to the movement’s most basis principles: its aesthetic of the unrestrained imagination, and its spirit of total disrespect. Surrealism has run its course in France, but it lives in Prague, clandestine and constantly renewing itself. Finally, Kundera underscores the quality of *The Ceiling* that will become central to his post-emigration criticism: its autonomy. By defying Western expectations that every novel from the East must be a political novel, Řezníček’s novel is true to the large context.

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81 “[C]’est ‘l’imagination au pouvoir!’ non pas comme slogan abstrait écrit sur les murs, mais comme réalité artistique on ne peut plus concrète.” Ibid.
Chapter Three - Joseph Brodsky: Taxonomy of a Tradition

At this very moment it’s as if millions of tiny hooks had pierced my core. They’ll sink into my bone marrow and then tug like a fisherman pulling his line. It’s a deathly pain. But if someone waves to me as you have, it eases the pain just to know that someone empathizes.¹

Bohumil Hrabal

Joseph Brodsky had yet to publish a word of prose in any language when he was compelled by authorities to emigrate from the Soviet Union in June 1972.² Brodsky (Iosif Aleksandrovich Brodskii) had begun writing and translating poetry as an adolescent in Leningrad the 1950s, and in the 1960s he achieved international celebrity thanks to his sensational show trial for “parasitism” and then for his poetry. Within weeks of his arrival in the United States, he wrote an open letter to the Soviet General Secretary Brezhnev that appeared in the Washington Post, and in October he introduced himself to American readers with a featured article in The New York Times Magazine, titled “A Writer Is a Lonely Traveler, and No One Is His Helper.”³ From then on his poetry was complemented by a steady stream of essays and reviews, initially translated by others but after 1976 composed in English.⁴ Brodsky is known to Russians primarily for his poetry, but elsewhere it is his prose that has been more positively received (and better understood) and that has left a greater mark on the broader literary culture. The essays

¹ “Právě teď se mi zabodly milióny udiček do dřeně v kostech. Nachytají si morek a pak táhnou jako rybář udicí. To je ale bolest k smrti. Avšak zamává-li mi někdo rukou jako Vy, je mi přece v té bolesti lehčejí, že někdo se mnou cítí.” Bohumil Hrabal, Morytáty a legendy (Československý spisovatel, 1968), p. 17. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
themselves have contributed significantly to Brodsky’s renown as a poet. His numerous essays about Russian literature are devoted largely to a small handful of writers, and they tend to return to a small cluster of problems regarding the Russian character, the mission of literature, and the relation between the two. The absence of a concerted, systematic articulation of those problems and the often unexpressed assumptions underlying the texts may, when one considers them collectively, create the impression of a diffuse assortment of only loosely related and partially developed themes. In fact, together they form a cohesive, if oblique, history of Russian literature.

Of greatest importance to Brodsky were poets of the late Silver Age, separated from his cohort by decades of suppression and official art but to whom he had a direct link in his friendship with Anna Akhmatova. She, Marina Tsvetaeva, and Osip Mandelstam are all the subject of individual essays, and Tsvetaeva’s “New Year’s Greetings” (‘Новогоднее”) is the focus of a 20,000-word close reading. Brodsky had a low opinion of the prose for which Boris Pasternak is best known outside of Russia, and the esteem we know he had for Pasternak’s poetry is rarely reflected in these texts. The omission of Pushkin is more surprising, given his place in the canon and given Brodsky’s admiration for him. The most concentrated treatment may be found in the few pages about Pushkin’s The Bronze Horseman in “A Guide to a Renamed City,” on which more ink is devoted to Pushkin than in all other Brodsky texts combined. The occasional invocation of Pushkin’s contemporary Evgeny Baratynsky indicates the greater importance he held for Brodsky on the problems that most occupied him. Such

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7 Brodsky’s admiration for and emulation of Pushkin has been given considerable attention, and comparisons of the two are not unusual. Both Anatoly Naiman and Valentina Polukhina, for example, find similarities in their “universality.” Polukhina, “A Coagulation of Linguistic Energy,” an interview with Anatoly Naiman, trans. Valentina Polukhina and Chris Jones, Brodsky Through the Eyes of his Contemporaries, ed. Valentina Polukhina (New York, 1992), pp. 2-28 (21-22).
inversions were characteristic of Brodsky, who was always ready to challenge assumptions and overturn conventional hierarchies. “A Writer Is a Lonely Traveler,” for example, contains the claim that the Russian twentieth century has no more to show in the way of “great writers” than Andrei Platonov and perhaps Mikhail Zoshchenko; both of them, Brodsky adds, are generally regarded by Russians as superior to Solzhenitsyn, Pasternak, and others more commonly read by Westerners.9 The curious absence of poets from Brodsky’s “great writers” shortlist demonstrates a careless quality in his writing that can lead to confusion when combined with his penchant for generalizations and hyperbole.

His ambiguous allusions to “the Russian tradition” can be especially perplexing, since he commonly employs this and similar terms to refer alternately to two distinct and opposing legacies, one of which he disdains and the other of which he firmly endorses. In principle, he resists the idea of literary traditions altogether, claiming that it exaggerates the extent to which private aesthetics are subject to historical forces; it is also said to perpetuate clichés and superficial criteria, particularly among non-native readers and critics. Of the clichés Brodsky complains about most, the idea of a special Russian capacity for enduring misery is especially objectionable to him. In the vulgar form often repeated by Westerners, he regards the cliché of Russian suffering as a condescending Orientalist trope favored by critics fatigued by modernism and nostalgic for the didacticism of the traditional realist novel.10 But its origins are, he concedes, wholly Russian, traceable to a more complex mythology that was conceived, cultivated, and cherished during the Russian nineteenth century and that ultimately gave rise to what he contemptuously calls “the Russian tradition.”

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9 “A Writer Is a Lonely Traveler” 82.
10 *Less Than One* 274.
“The Russian tradition” in this sense broadly means *the mainstream of Russian literature for most of two centuries, formally un inventive and existentially indolent*. He employs this “tradition” as a foil when he wishes to underscore the exceptional quality of a favored writer, contrasting Tsvetaeva, for example, to “the tradition of Russian literature with its main tendency toward consoling, toward justifying (on the highest level, if possible) reality and the existing order of things in general.” Yet at other times Brodsky uses this very phrase to indicate the best of Russian literature, a tradition we might summarize as *the collective poetic mind, which assimilates experience, transcends it, and transmits its wisdom across generations:* “If there is any tradition in Russian prose,” he writes, for example, “it is one of searching for a greater thought, for a more exhaustive analysis of the human condition than is at present available, of looking for a better resource to ladle from to endure the siege of reality.” The inconsistent usage is plainly accidental and is a problem only until one recognizes it, after which it may serve to remind the reader of the invisible parallel framework that underlies most of these texts.

In an essay in which he contemplates the responsibilities of exile, Brodsky writes that the function of literature is “to save the next man, a new arrival, from falling into an old trap.” In this chapter I will argue that Brodsky’s writing on Russian literature is in essence a taxonomy of writers that arranges them according to how each responds to this commission. I begin by outlining his criticism of Russian realist fiction, which is founded on his claim that it is rooted in a solipsistic preoccupation with national trauma and infused with the pernicious spirit of “false consolation.” I then examine Brodsky’s description of a parallel tradition that strives to transcend experience and evident reality. Finally, I discuss the concept of *ambivalence*, which Brodsky

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11 Ibid., 191.
12 Ibid., 292.
calls “the paramount spiritual experience” of Russia’s modern era, and I trace the evolution of its function in his criticism.  

1. REALISM AND CONSOLATION

In the title essay of the collection *Less Than One*, Brodsky laments the failure of the English word “Evil” to produce the connotations that Russians automatically intuit from its analogue, possessed as they are of “an advanced notion” of the phenomenon. His earliest texts are interested in “the displacements […] produced in the consciousness of man” that are epitomized by the unprecedented trauma of modern Russian history, its arc beginning with the alleged moral degeneration of the intelligentsia in the nineteenth century and reaching its nadir with the moral “castration” perpetrated upon ordinary Russians in the twentieth. “Reflections on a Spawn of Hell,” published in *The New York Times Magazine* in 1973, offers a conventionally Christian explanation of this process, implicating materialism and the extinction of absolute moral categories, followed by the eventual disappearance of moral criteria altogether. What occurred, he underscores, was a process of attrition in which the instinctive discernment of good from evil was impossible because the categories had begun to resemble one another: “I mean not the mutual destruction of the two basic human categories—good and evil—as a result of the struggle between them, but their mutual decomposition as a result of coexistence. Putting it more precisely, I mean their convergence.”

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14 *Less Than One* 191.
15 Ibid., 31.
Brodsky’s debut in the United States coincided with a wave of publications of Soviet labor camp literature and a period of heightened attention to authors such as Nadezhda Mandelstam, Varlam Shalamov, and Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Solzhenitsyn, who had recently won the Nobel Prize in Literature, was considered such an effective agent for exposing the Soviet system and documenting the associated “displacements in consciousness” that Brodsky, otherwise exceedingly preoccupied with form, was initially willing to overlook and even justify what he saw as the defects of Solzhenitsyn’s style. Brodsky’s 1977 review of Volumes III and IV of The Gulag Archipelago, which he calls the author’s “own Nuremberg trial,” treats the history as if it were a novel in which, following One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich and Cancer Ward, the author has finally abandoned the conventions of the genre as inadequate to his material.\(^\text{18}\) The review begins in a defensive crouch by asserting the inevitability of the work’s failure to satisfy expectations, conceding that its ambitions—the comprehensible description of crimes of an incomprehensible scale—are “doomed” and that the reader is sure to object to its length and lack of focus. “Every book of evil is long and monotonous,” Brodsky declares, “but these are the characteristics of the genre, since the genre is epic.”\(^\text{19}\) Solzhenitsyn’s “esthetic intuition” is said to lead him to rightly disregard the sense of proportion readers expect from a novel, to deflect attention from himself, and to reject any and all literary devices beyond the modest conventions of Socialist Realism. Brodsky even asserts that “Soviet rule has perhaps acquired its Homer in Solzhenitsyn,” a claim he would repeat on several occasions.\(^\text{20}\)

The review’s lone caveat then is philosophical, rather than stylistic. Solzhenitsyn understands as well as Dostoevsky that every heart is a battleground for good and evil, Brodsky writes, but for Solzhenitsyn it is an abstraction. His sentimental Christian confidence that good

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\(^{19}\) Ibid., 638.  
\(^{20}\) Ibid., 639.
will ultimately prevail blinds him to the real potential for evil within everyone, including himself. “Solzhenitsyn did not and does not understand one simple thing,” he told Adam Michnik many years later. “He thought his problem was communism, that it was a question of political doctrine. He didn’t understand that his problem was human beings.” This objection grows in importance by 1984 when Brodsky writes “Catastrophes in the Air,” in which it is the basis for criticism of not only Solzhenitsyn but of the entire mainstream of Russian fiction stretching from Tolstoy to Valentin Rasputin—the first of the two “Russian traditions” described in this chapter’s introduction. Brodsky, who saw great potential for absurdist experimentation in Cancer Ward, had by that time become impatient with Solzhenitsyn’s refusal to stray from realist convention and he even detected a relation between the work’s philosophical and formal flaws. “Given the magnitude of the historical nightmare he describes,” he writes in 1984, the inability to see the human depravity at the root of political depravity “is spectacular enough to suspect a dependence between aesthetic conservatism and resistance to the notion of man being radically bad.” As far-fetched as this hypothesis may seem, it is fully consistent with the premises of the essay as a whole, relying as it does on Brodsky’s contention that “aesthetics is the mother of ethics,” a corollary of which is the idea that certain aesthetic qualities contain specific ethical implications. It is logical then that he should see a direct relationship between realism as a literary method on one hand, and the alleged metaphysics of the authors who practice it on the other.

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22 Less Than One 299.
23 On Grief and Reason 49.
“Catastrophes in the Air” is chiefly a tribute to the early Soviet writer Andrei Platonov, for Brodsky the greatest Russian prose stylist of the twentieth century. But it is perhaps more important as Brodsky’s most complete and concentrated treatment of what he calls Russian consolation, a problem essential to his conception of Russian literature and even of Russia itself, but one confined to the periphery of most of his other texts. Brodsky begins the essay by considering the “growing suspicion” among some that Russia will end the twentieth century without having produced any truly great fiction. He attributes this poverty only partly to the interference of the state. More important are the effects of a crippling history whose “Gorgon-like stare” confronts a writer from all directions. “[S]uch was the magnitude of what happened in Russia in this century,” he writes, “that all the genres available to prose were, and still are, in one way or another, shot through with this tragedy’s mesmerizing presence.” When Brodsky finally introduces his essay’s subject, it is as an author of European modernism, a peer of Joyce, Musil, and Kafka. The Russian environment in which Platonov miraculously appeared is described as having been thoroughly saturated with realism, here denoting the high realism of the nineteenth-century novel, as well as subsequent genres that conform to its broadest principles, including Socialist Realism, contemporary “village prose,” and much of dissident fiction.

According to Brodsky, this “realist” umbrella is defined as much by a set of ethical conceits as by any formal characteristic, and the relation between the form and the ideas is a fundamental and organic one. Chief among the conceits of “realism” is a victim complex nurtured by a flattering opinion of humankind—the fallacy for which he dismisses Solzhenitsyn. This is supposedly predicated on Orthodox Christian doctrine, which is distinct from certain

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24 The essay, first presented as a lecture under the auspices of the Academy of American Poets, was originally called “On Russian Literature: The Case of Platonov.” “Less than One: Proposal and table of contents, draft/undated” (Brodsky Papers, Box 70, Folder 1833, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University).

25 Less Than One 269, 271.
strains of Western Christianity in holding that every human, bearing the undistorted image of
God, inherits Adam’s fallen nature and its consequences, but not his guilt.26 A related conceit,
Brodsky claims, is a deterministic understanding of events that reassures readers even as it robs
them of agency. Combined with an instinctively tragic vision of the world, a natural enough
consequence of Russia’s history, these notions amount to an anodyne philosophy of “false
consolation” and they foster a state of existential laziness. “Consolation” (uteshenie) became a
byword in Brodsky’s lexicon, as in a brief sketch of Evgeny Baratynsky that describes him as an
anomaly within “a cultural tradition whose main tenor is consolation.”27 Russian culture’s
fundamental tendency, he declares, is that of consolation, of “rationalizing the existing order of
things at the most suitable metaphysical level. It is not a tendency to deny, but rather to excuse.
And the writers who stand outside this tendency can be counted on your fingers.”28

Events of the twentieth century only deepened the Russian attachment to realism, as
Brodsky explains it. The Bolsheviks and the Civil War they produced eclipsed everything that
had proceeded them in the scope of the disaster they represented, at once confirming Russia’s
tragic understanding of its own history and dooming its literature. The mythology of their trauma
insulated Russians from the possibility of authentic collective memory, and a “genetic backslide”
began; formal experimentation was forbidden, leaving fiction with a surfeit of tragic material but
a paucity of stylistic possibilities.29 The result was an acceleration of the process begun in the

26 Eastern Christianity never accepted Saint Augustine’s teaching on original sin and hereditary guilt, which holds
that all people, as descendents of Adam and Eve, are born guilty of their original parents’ sin. Orthodox Christians
refer not to “fallen man” but to his “fallen nature,” which means that human nature, while open to acts of evil, is
capable of choosing not to sin.
27 Joseph Brodsky, Foreword and biographical notes, An Age Ago: A Selection of Nineteenth-Century Russian
28 “Ведь основная тенденция русской культуры—это тенденция утешения, тенденция обоснования
существующего миропорядка на каком-либо наиболее подходящем трансцендентальном уровне. Это не
тенденция отрицания—это тенденция оправдания и утешения. И можно на пальцах пересчитать тех, кто из
этой тенденции выпадает.” Большая книга интервью 324.
29 Less Than One  271.
nineteenth century, when raw material had first overwhelmed aesthetic imperatives and this material’s vital nature had compromised artistic detachment, leading to didacticism and fanatical attention to physical and psychological detail. Disaster on this scale demanded the ritual slaughter of institutions, but faith (whether Orthodox, Populist, or Marxist) in man’s innate goodness always prevailed, and scrutiny of the human condition yielded to mere anthropology, reducing the novel to “the debilitated being’s flattering self-portrayal.”30 While “Catastrophes” echoes Brodsky’s earlier defense of Solzhenitsyn in acknowledging the challenge of treating tragic material in aesthetically interesting ways, his assessment of the results themselves is no longer sympathetic.

Of course Brodsky does not reject the tragic as suitable material for fiction, but he insists that it must transcend the merely circumstantial, a condition he believes is more often met by Russian poetry than by prose. An article on Soviet war literature mentions Boris Slutsky as one of only a few Russian poets or novelists who transcended their individual experience when writing of the Second World War: “The sense of tragedy that his poems convey frequently extends, almost against his own will, from the concrete and historical to the existential: where every tragedy, in the end, belongs.”31 In the work of Marina Tsvetaeva, the Russian poet to whom Brodsky felt nearest and whom he regarded as the greatest of the twentieth century, “every theme was rendered, purely euphonically, in a tragic key.” Her voice “had the sound of something unfamiliar and frightening to the Russian ear: the unacceptability of the world.” But her refusal to accept the world was not a function of particular political or personal circumstances: “It was not the reaction of a revolutionary or a progressive demanding changes

30 Ibid., 270.
31 Joseph Brodsky, “Literature and War—a Symposium: The Soviet Union,” Times Literary Supplement May 17, 1985, pp. 543-44 (544). On W. H. Auden, Brodsky wrote that “if there was ever any drama in Auden’s voice, it wasn’t his own personal drama but a public or existential one. He’d never put himself in the center of the tragic picture[.]” Less Than One 364-65.
for the better, nor was it the conservatism or snobbery of an aristocrat who remembers better
days. On the level of content, it was a question of the tragedy of existence in general, par
excellence, outside a temporal context.” 32

Brodsky’s review of *Hope Abandoned*, the second volume of Nadezhda Mandelstam’s
memoirs, helps us understand his assertion that “every tragedy” is existential. Here he proposes
that the twentieth century reversed the redemptive message of the New Testament and returned
the Christian world to the Old Testament notion of an arbitrary God. Everyone discovers in his
own time that “for this life Christ is not enough, Freud is not enough, Marx is not enough, nor is
existentialism or Buddha. All of these are only means of justifying the holocaust, not of averting
it.” 33 A universe stripped of explanatory devices such as Christ or Marxism is characterized by
what Northrop Frye called “tragic irony,” which is distinguished from ordinary tragedy by its
lack of moral intelligibility. Whereas in classical tragedy the hero’s isolation is the consequence
of a provocation against divine law, tragic irony transpires in a universe in which there is no
apparent relation between the protagonist’s actions and his fate. The essential moment of
discovery, in which the hero suddenly recognizes his transgression, never occurs. He isn’t
innocent, since no one is innocent, and he isn’t guilty of any crime commensurate with his
misfortune. The Biblical Job is the victim of tragic irony. 34 It is not surprising, then, that the
Book of Job is the part of the Bible Brodsky says he understands best, or that its protagonist is
one he often associates with Marina Tsvetaeva. 35

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32 Ibid., 210-11.
33 “Beyond Consolation,” n. pag.
35 Brodsky routinely calls Tsvetaeva “Job in a skirt.” E.g. in Solomon Volkov, “Conversations with Joseph
As with most tragedy, Brodsky writes, in Tsvetaeva’s poetry the lyrical subject’s response to her fate consists in “protest against an unthinkable prospect,” and he hears the essence of her tone in two lines from her final cycle, “Verses for Bohemia” (“Стихи к Чехии,” 1938-1939): “To your insane world / But one reply—I refuse.” Yet this is not a rebellious stance, he cautions, but the very opposite. In Tsvetaeva we have “the cardinal statement of ‘the voice of heavenly truth / against the earthly truth.’” Brodsky often describes Tsvetaeva’s moral stance as “Calvinist,” which he explains as a matter of “man keeping strict accounts with himself, with his conscience and consciousness. […] A Calvinist, to put it briefly, is someone who is constantly declaring Judgment Day against himself—as if in the absence of (or impatient for) the Almighty.” The flawed lyrical subject in Baratynsky’s poems is, Brodsky writes, most often a depiction of Baratynsky himself, whom the poet pursues with “Calvinistic fervor.” Such a tone is natural enough for Russian consciousness, Brodsky writes, but when Tsvetaeva employed it this was something entirely new to the reader of Russian literature. “[T]he degree of responsibility placed on the reader’s consciousness” by Tsvetaeva’s lament “exceeded—and exceeds to this day—the degree of the Russian reader’s preparedness to accept this responsibility.”

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36 Less Than One 247.
37 “На твой безумный мир / Ответ один — отказ.” “Conversations with Joseph Brodsky” 42.
38 Ibid., 40. Here Brodsky cites Tsvetaeva’s poem “Заводские”: “Голос правды небесной / Против правды земной.”
39 Ibid., 39.
40 An Age Ago 159.
41 Less Than One 192-93.
No single writer bears more blame for the reader’s lack of “preparedness,” in Brodsky’s eyes, than Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy. Russian literature, Brodsky writes in “Catastrophes in the Air,” “has been in a metaphysical slump for quite some time, ever since it produced Tolstoy, who took the idea of art reflecting reality a bit too literally and in whose shadow the subordinate clauses of Russian prose are writhing indolently till this day.”

This is as close as he ever comes to addressing the substance of Tolstoy’s work itself, since the author is less important to him for what he wrote than for what Brodsky believes he represents: a model for generations of realist authors, and the very embodiment of the spirit of consolation and its associated ills. One of his former students cites a lecture in which Brodsky contrasted Pasternak’s poetry—“so simple, so direct”—to his “post-Tolstoyan” prose. Elsewhere the reader is warned against the hubristic temptation of a “post-Tolstoy” ethics, which honors the hollow moral victory of peaceful nonresistance and which “undermined a great deal of the nation’s resolve in confronting the police state.” In other words, Tolstoy’s example is corrosive not only for its effect on writers, but also, indeed especially, for its effect on the reader.

Brodsky’s depiction of Tolstoy is unabashedly impressionistic and bears obvious flaws, starting with his claim that the novelist’s realist style rests on the mystical resignation of his Christianity. This anachronism completely ignores Tolstoy’s spiritual crisis and his renunciation of realist art, which came after he had written most of his fiction and before his mystical final decades. Moreover, the essay would benefit from textual evidence of the “consolatory tendency” so important to its argument. This paper does not address such problems, since my purpose is not

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42 Ibid., 275.
43 Lamont 576.
44 Less Than One 391.
to polemicize with Brodsky, even as I acknowledge that his premises deserve scrutiny. The only challenge to “Catastrophes In the Air” of which I am aware is written by Galya Diment, who rejects Brodsky’s argument that Tolstoy’s example was antithetical to modernism, and she altogether dismisses the tradition of forcing a “choice” between him and Dostoevsky.45

Tolstoy published his first novel *Childhood* (Детство) only a few years after Dostoevsky published *Poor Folk* (Бедные люди), and Brodsky regards his appearance as an unwelcome diversion, a choice between zero-sum alternatives at the critical moment when Russia had achieved an unprecedented measure of self-awareness and readers sensed an approaching cataclysm.46 Knowing both novelists largely through the work of a single translator (Constance Garnett) and thus mistakenly perceiving in the period’s fiction a stylistically and ethically coherent whole, the casual Western reader is said to confuse and even conflate the two writers, whereas Brodsky sees them as the founders of radically diverging lines of development. Dostoevsky lies far outside Brodsky’s definition of realism and so is a stylistic outlier, running counter to his era’s prevailing tendencies.47 But he also is the leading representative of the “tradition” to which Baratynsky and Tsvetaeva belong. Brodsky once proposed that the metaphysical seriousness that Baratynsky brought to poetry marks the beginning of “true Russian literature” and, in this sense, he perceives Dostoevsky as a link in a chain extending from Baratynsky through Platonov to the present.48

As with his treatment of Tolstoy and Solzhenitsyn, formal considerations are paramount as he reads Dostoevsky: hence the conviction that his greatness lies not in the strength of his

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46 *Less Than One* 276.
47 Ibid., 275.
48 Большая книга интервью 324. According to Polukhina, Brodsky claimed that it was an encounter with Baratynsky’s work that persuaded him to become a poet. Valentina Polukhina, *Joseph Brodsky: A Poet for Our Time* (Cambridge, UK, 1989), p. 7.
ideas but in the “texture” of his material. Dostoevsky’s distinguishing achievement, according to Brodsky, was to bring a new poetic sensibility to Russian prose, yielding to what Brodsky calls “the intuition of language” instead of the dictates of conscience or even narrative.49 Language is an elemental force in Brodsky’s metaphysical universe, in part due to the mediating role it plays in man’s antagonistic relation with time through qualities such as meter, the rules of syntax, and its function as a tool of memory. Having said, for example, that Yuz Aleshkovsky’s novel The Hand owes more to his “ear” than to tradition, Brodsky explains that the Russian prison yarn is as much an autonomous “monologue of the language” as it is the author’s own tale, its story engendered by its phonetic texture (rather than the reverse) and developing “organically, according to the vegetative laws of language.”50 He reads Platonov’s Foundation Pit, its style intentionally thick with utopian banalities wrapped in a tangle of oblique syntax, as a parable shaped by the possibilities of Russian synthetic grammar. Stretched to the limit by millenarian speculation, the language of the new society “begins to gasp in the subjunctive mood” and suffocates in a semantic vacuum.51

The language’s synthetic character is similarly said to be at work in Dostoevsky’s treatment of the mind’s behavior and in his method of inquiry, which is too trenchant to allow us to attribute it to the novelist’s Orthodox faith. The relatively elastic Russian subordinate clause invites digression, Brodsky observes in “The Power of the Elements,” and creates a provisional relationship between a speaker and his words, making it “the language of although” rather than of either/or.52 “A born metaphysician,” Brodsky writes, Dostoevsky

49 Less Than One 278.
52 Less Than One 160. Such observations evoke Bakhtin’s identification of the “word with a sideways glance” and the “word with a loophole” as devices contributing to the dialogic nature of Dostoevsky’s prose, in contrast to that
instinctively realized that for probing infinity, whether an ecclesiastical one or that of the human psyche, there was no tool more far-reaching than his highly inflected mother tongue […] His art was anything but mimetic: it wasn’t imitating reality; it was creating, or better still, reaching for one. In this vector of his he was effectively straying from Orthodoxy (or for that matter from any creed). He simply felt that art is not about life, if only because life is not about life. For Dostoevsky, art, like life, is about what man exists for. Like biblical parables, his novels are vehicles to obtain the answer and not goals unto themselves.53

In other words, while Dostoevsky may be a writer on a mission, his method is leavened with doubt and reinforced by the satisfaction of his having first undergone a dramatic encounter with the enemy and dismissed the temptations of its position one by one.

Literature “is a dictionary of the language in which life speaks to man,” Brodsky writes in “The Condition We Call Exile.” “Its function is to save the next man, a new arrival, from falling into an old trap […].”54 What he believes this ultimately means for Russians and Russian literature is revealed almost parenthetically in his introduction to Aleshkovsky’s novel, embedded within a passage about the author’s “pedigree”: “The immanent logic of strophe and that of catastrophe have a lot in common. The profundity, profanity, hilarity, and heartbreak of The Hand owe more to this writer’s ear than to the traditions of Russian fiction. No Turgenev, no Tolstoy or Chekhov prepares you for this book, just as their books prepared nobody for the reality of this century.”55 A consequence of Russian literature’s obsession with history, the passage suggests, is the failure to fulfill its essential function, which is to show the reader how to be more free. The duty to take up this task during the worst years of the twentieth century is a motif running through Brodsky’s commentary on his most beloved Russian poets. By applying the lessons of modernism, not least “the degree of primacy of an individual over his own or his

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53 Less Than One 278.
54 On Grief and Reason 33.
nation’s predicament,” his poets demonstrate what Tolstoy’s acolytes fail to understand: that “art has outlived tragedy, and, with it, so has the artist.” The artist’s sensibility owes more to “the dynamics, logic, and laws of his artifice than to his actual historical experience, which is nearly always redundant. The artist’s job vis-à-vis his society is to project, to offer this sensibility to the audience as perhaps the only available route of departure from the known, captive self.”

Brodsky often returns to the theme of transcending experience, and metaphors of escape and movement between “realities” are common in his accounts of both the creative process and of its transformative effect on the reader. An article about Tomas Venclova locates the “ethical focus” of his poetry in its lyricism, because of its contagious quality. “In the best circumstances, this ‘good news’ provokes a similar internal motion in readers, moves them toward creation of a world on the level suggested by this news. At the least, it liberates them from dependence on the reality they know, making them aware that this reality is not the only one.”

In an essay on Sergei Dovlatov, Brodsky writes that a writer “creates a consciousness, a world perception which never existed or was never described before him. A writer reflects reality not like a mirror but like an object which is attacked by reality.” The dig at mimetic writing signals a familiar renunciation of the Tolstoyan spirit of consolation: Dovlatov’s protagonist is one “who does not attempt to justify either reality or himself; who waves this reality off; who exits a room rather than trying to tidy it up or finding a supreme profound meaning or Providence’s hand in its muck.”

Brodsky was loath to consider literature in terms of communal utility, but his claims about the relation between realism and historicism suggest that more is at stake than the

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56 Less Than One 273.
consciousness of individual readers or poets or even the fate of one literary tradition or another. “If literature has a social function,” he proposes in an exchange with Milan Kundera, “it is, perhaps, to show man his optimal parameters, his spiritual maximum.” Kundera had recently written of his preference for the playful skepticism of Diderot to Dostoevsky’s “universe of overblown gestures, murky depths and aggressive sentimentality,” to which Brodsky responded by invoking the limits of reason and asking whether in its blindness to moral categories Western rationalism is capable of making “real discoveries.” He cites the long, bloody resistance to communism in Russia and its naïve embrace by the more rationalist Czechs, and he attributes the latter to a failure of imagination conditioned by a conception of man that leaves no room for a soul. To this he contrasts Dostoevsky’s expansive and terrifying vision of man torn between faith and disbelief, oscillating in a “pendulum motion” over the twin abysses of good and evil.

Regarding life as a transitory condition, Brodsky argues, real enough but incomplete, one examines it in a manner that attempts to see beyond its apparent limits. Such a writer “perceives his, and anyone else’s, life as a test tube for certain human qualities, the retention of which under extreme duress is crucial for […] the species’ arrival.”

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61 Less Than One” 278.
3. THE PENDULUM AND AMBIVALENCE

Brodsky had used this pendulum metaphor to describe the notion of divided man years earlier in his 1977 review of *The Gulag Archipelago*. There he argued that Russia’s intimacy with the extremes of human experience make the Russian condition quintessentially human: “Russian doublethink and doublespeak, however unattractive they may seem, do in fact indicate that the Russian people lie closer to the existential core of being than any other people, who prefer the right or left wall of the clock cabinet.”62 We encounter similar language in his close reading of Tsvetaeva’s “New Year’s Greetings,” which lingers over the line, “Who has ever been to Russia has beheld the next world / In this one.” Brodsky considers the line a reflection of the poet’s “understanding of Russia as the most perfect approximation” of the human condition, based on humanity’s tragic nature and Tsvetaeva’s “grasp” of the Revolution as “the core of existence” laid bare.63 When he compares Platonov to Western modernists in “Catastrophes in the Air,” he does so with reservations because the latter were strangers to the “extreme character of the human predicament that Platonov is concerned with.”64 Yet the essential quality of Brodsky’s Russian pendulum is not the violence of its trajectory, but its balance. That Brodsky associated a pendulum with moderation is suggested in the following passage in which he uses the sound of a pendulum to characterize metric form: “Meter is really just a reflection of a certain state of mind. […] These days I prefer dol’nik, intonational verse, and this gives the language a certain neutrality. […] If there has been any evolution, it’s in my desire to neutralize any and every lyric element, to bring it closer to the sound of a pendulum.”65

62 “Geography of Evil” 642.
63 Less Than One 227-28. The original text in “Novogodnee” reads: «На Руси бывал – тот свет на этом/ зрел.»
64 Ibid., 281.
65 «Размеры, вы знаете, – это по сути сосуды, или, по крайней мере, отражение определенного психического состояния. […] На сегодняшний день в том, что я сочиняю, гораздо больший процент долника,
Like the Solzhenitsyn review and the Kundera polemic, the essay “Pendulum’s Song,” which reviews a biography of the modern Greek poet Constantine Cavafy, uses the pendulum metaphor to symbolize the inability to choose between spiritual truths, but here Brodsky applies it to the dilemma of just one man. The biography focuses on Cavafy’s relation to his native Alexandria, and Brodsky is most interested in those poems concerned with late Antiquity, when Rome converted to Christianity and the recalcitrant Alexandrians were compelled to choose between the old and new faiths. Cavafy himself was torn between his own Orthodox Christianity and what Brodsky opaquely calls his “paganism,” having been “born with the mixture of both in his veins.” It is a very sympathetic depiction, and the classical theme reminds us that Brodsky himself employed the centaur in a cycle of poems to represent his own sense of dividedness as both a Russian and an American, spirit and matter, etc. He notices frequent appearances of Julian the Apostate in Cavafy’s work and explains that Julian, having revived polytheism, tolerated Christians and even permitted public debate between priests of the two religions.

“Cavafy,” Brodsky speculates, must have seen Julian as a man who tried to preserve the two metaphysical possibilities, not by making a choice, but by creating links between them that would make the best of both. […] Risking the charge of idealization, one is tempted to call Julian a great soul obsessed with the recognition that neither paganism nor Christianity is sufficient by itself and that, taken separately, neither can exercise man’s spiritual capacity to the fullest. There are always tormenting leftovers, always the sense of a certain partial vacuum, causing, at best, a sense of sin.  

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66 Less Than One 64.
68 Less Than One 66-67.
Julian’s solution, as Brodsky reads it—neither a false choice, nor a swinging pendulum, but an uneasy coexistence—clearly appeals to him. By the time he writes “Pendulum’s Song” in 1977, he has begun to identify a Russian quality that reflects a similar cautious resignation in the face of ambiguity, which he calls *ambivalence*.

The term had first appeared four years earlier in the essay “Reflections on a Spawn of Hell,” cited above and written in March of 1973 for the twentieth anniversary of Stalin’s death. In some respects the text is programmatic, marking Russian nihilism as qualitatively different from mere atheism. Brodsky’s purpose, he writes, is to consider the “pogrom of the mind”—the moral effect of the century’s transformations on his own consciousness. Stalin was to be both feared and loved, murder and production had become somehow mutually implicated, and the effect was a sense that “it was all the same”: “It was then, from our moral soil, abundantly fertilized by the idea of the ambivalence of everything and everyone, that Doublethink came into being. […] With the transformation of absolute concepts into arbitrary categories, little by little the idea of the arbitrariness of existence has taken root in our consciousness.”69 (Brodsky notes that he does not mean “doublethink” in the Orwellian sense, i.e. to indicate terrorized hypocrisy, but rather in the sense of being genuinely of two minds.) Without the constraining belief in a higher order, the idea of responsibility to anything but oneself became meaningless, a circumstance favorable to totalitarian systems. The “ambivalence” described in this text is plainly not the constructive, maximizing dialectic that later attracted Brodsky to Julian the Apostate.

Five months later he used “ambivalence” to refer to essentially the same phenomenon, but with an entirely different set of connotations. In August, 1973, he reviewed a collection of poems by Anna Akhmatova, translated into English. Like many such reviews by Brodsky, “Translating Akhmatova” criticizes the translator for straying from the formal parameters of the

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69 “Reflections on a Spawn of Hell” 68, 70.
original poems. It is an especially egregious error in the case of Akhmatova, whose infrequent juxtaposing of form and content amounts to an “explosion” on the page, and an additional complexity lies in her effort to “stifle” this explosion. “Most of Akhmatova’s poems are written with falling intonation toward the end,” Brodsky writes of her response to traumatic events, “as if nothing special has happened.” She was a believer, he notes, and so she understood that “no one is guilty.” “Or more precisely,” he adds, “that the guilty exist, but that they are also human beings, just like their victims.”

The clarification is illuminating, because it marks a crucial distinction between the way in which Akhmatova interprets the Orthodox reading of the Fall and the way in which, according to Brodsky, Solzhenitsyn does. For Solzhenitsyn, the idea that man is born sinless magnifies the manifest guilt of the oppressor while implicitly exonerating the victim. For Akhmatova, the same idea reminds her that her oppressor is made in the image of God. Brodsky continues: “I think that she knew the ambivalence of consciousness characteristic of all Russians. As a rule ambivalence leads to one of three things: cynicism, wisdom, or complete paralysis, i.e., an inability to act. Akhmatova achieved wisdom.”70 In each of these two texts, “ambivalence” indicates the knowledge that one is simultaneously capable of performing both good and evil acts. In “Reflections on a Spawn of Hell,” the awareness of another’s transgression “leads to cynicism” and is a reason for further transgression; in “Translating Akhmatova,” the awareness of another’s transgression “leads to wisdom” and is a reason to study one’s own heart.

After this, Brodsky seems to use the pendulum metaphor and “ambivalence” interchangeably. Still, we know from the Cavafy essay that he finds the former wanting, and the Akhmatova review suggests important nuances contained in the latter. Rather than careening

from one extreme to another, for example, Brodsky’s ambivalent Russian permanently inhabits the space where opposites converge. The result is a variation not only on Dostoevsky’s oscillating soul, but also on his “universal man,” the “genuine Russian” who aspires to reconcile the contradictions of the world and usher in an age of brotherly communion in the name of God.\textsuperscript{71} It is a decidedly unchristian variation, epitomizing the lukewarm spirit rejected by Christ in the Book of Revelation and offering no possibility of holiness.\textsuperscript{72} But its importance grows, and Brodsky affirms it with increasing conviction. While it was merely “characteristic of all Russians” a few years earlier, now it defines them; where before wisdom was the best of several possible consequences of ambivalence, it now becomes identified with it:

Ambivalence, I think, is the chief characteristic of my nation. There isn’t a Russian executioner who isn’t scared of turning victim one day, nor is there the sorriest victim who would not acknowledge (if only to himself) a mental ability to become an executioner. Our immediate history has provided well for both. There is some wisdom in this. One might even think that this ambivalence is wisdom, that life itself is neither good nor bad, but arbitrary. […] This kind of ambivalence, I think, is precisely that “blessed news” which the East, having little else to offer, is about to impose on the rest of the world. And the world looks ripe for it.\textsuperscript{73} In an interview with Adam Michnik, the meaning expands beyond questions of moral choices to include the ambivalence of the will. Soviet rule was destroyed by Solidarity in Poland, Brodsky claims, when the Russians found themselves facing a losing prospect whether they chose to invade or not. “A state of ambivalence is a disaster for an ideologue,” he adds. “In an instant it corrodes everything in sight. It eliminates the will to act.”\textsuperscript{74} His Nobel lecture makes a similar

\begin{footnotes}
\item[72] “I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew thee out of my mouth.” Revelation 3: 15-16, King James Version.
\item[73] \textit{Less Than One} 10.
\item[74] «Состояние амбивалентности для идеолога – это страшная катастрофа. Потому что оно моментально разъедает все вокруг. Лишает воли к действию.» \textit{Большая книга интервью} 654-55.
\end{footnotes}
case about ambivalence and the consent of the masses, linking it to the subversive effects of literature: “Art in general, literature especially, and poetry in particular, is not exactly favored by champions of the common good, masters of the masses, heralds of historical necessity. For there, where art has stepped, where a poem has been read, they discover, in place of the anticipated consent and unanimity, indifference and polyphony; in place of the resolve to act, inattention and fastidiousness.”

4. AKHMATOVA’S RESTRAINT

Still, moral agency remains at the heart of ambivalence as a meaningful notion, and the ethical implications are turned inside out as its meaning evolves. Whereas the awareness that existence is arbitrary once meant freedom from responsibility, in later texts the moral ambiguity of an arbitrary and indifferent universe places a greater burden on the subject in discerning good from evil, and the proper response to moral outrage is usually restraint. It is no surprise that, for Brodsky’s poets, this means stylistic restraint. In the essay “To Please a Shadow,” Brodsky writes that this was the quality that first attracted him to Auden. “Don’t cry wolf,” Auden seemed to be saying, “even though the wolf’s at the door.” In an essay that echoes the passage about Akhmatova’s “stifled explosion,” Brodsky describes Tomas Venclova’s tone as striking for “the conscientious, intentional monotony that seems to be trying to muffle the far too obvious drama of his existence.” For a Russian poet, traditional verse form, and especially rhyme, means “an establishment of order in chaos.” “Poetry is an art of boundaries,” he writes in a piece on Bella Akhmadulina in Vogue, “and no one knows that better than a Russian poet. Meter, rhyme, folk

75 On Grief and Reason 46-47.
76 Less Than One 360.
77 “Poetry as a Form of Resistance to Reality” 224.
78 “Translating Akhmatova,” n. pag.
tradition, classical heritage, prosody itself—all these things conspire strongly against one’s ‘urge of a song’ […]. Akhmadulina’s poetry is a long-lasting love affair with the boundaries […].”

Witholding judgment is a critical aspect of the ethos of ambivalence, and Brodsky finds this to be especially problematic with Russian writers: a sense of victimhood, as noted earlier, is a chief characteristic of Russian “false consolation.” In his early “A Writer Is a Lonely Traveler,” Brodsky warns that “man fighting on the exterior with Evil automatically identifies himself with the Good and begins to consider himself a bearer of Good,” and this is “no less widespread in Russia than anywhere else.”

Speaking in an interview about Nikolai Klyuev, Brodsky complains that “with him, as with any Russian, you’re constantly aware of his desire to pronounce sentence on the world. […] In my opinion, almost all Russian poets (whether or not they are believers) abuse ecclesiastical terminology. You’re always getting the ‘God and I’ situation in their poetry, which, in my opinion, is immodest.”

Akhmatova, “utterly un-Russian” in temperament, and Auden are most frequently cited as models for refusing the consolation of victimhood, demonstrating forgiveness and the acknowledgment of their own grief. “More than any other art, poetry is a form of sentimental education, and the lines that Akhmatova readers learned by heart were to temper their hearts against the new era’s onslaught of vulgarity. The comprehension of the metaphysics of personal drama betters one’s chances of weathering the drama of history.”

Brodsky’s own peers are similarly invoked for their rejection of histrionics and for adopting an “anti-heroic posture,” which he calls the “ideé fixe” of his generation. He attributes this in part to the failure of the Hungarian uprising, which he compares to the Decembrists’

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80 “A Writer Is a Lonely Traveler” 82.
81 “Conversations with Joseph Brodsky” 91.
82 Less Than One 40-41.
83 Ibid., 367.
defeat and the end of the Spanish Republic in its effect on the generation’s outlook and the “personal eschatology” of its individual members.\(^{84}\) He also praises his generation for resisting the temptation of “the poetics of ruins and debris” and instead taking up the broken thread of the pre-war poets: “Bella Akhmadulina was born in the darkest year of Russia’s history, in 1937; and this alone proves the magnificent viability of the Russian culture.”\(^{85}\) It may be a paradox particular to Russia that this “anti-heroic posture” shuns collective sentiment and embraces a “committed individualism.” Gennady Smakov, Brodsky tells Solomon Volkov, was typical in his indifference to the opinion of the émigré community in New York. In this respect, his cohort “may even have been more American than many real Americans born in the States, at least on the philosophical and maybe psychological level.”\(^{86}\)

The essay on Sergei Dovlatov cited earlier depicts a writer who is the very embodiment of ambivalence, a practitioner of art that aims “to save the next man,” and the antithesis of the spirit of consolation.

Our writer does not make a drama out of his own life because he dislikes drama, physical or psychological. He is great, in the first place, precisely for his rejection of the tragic tradition (which itself is but a noble name for inertia) and of the comforting pathos of Russian literature. The tone of his prose is ironic and restrained, despite the desperate existence it describes. […] The tone of his speech cultivates restraint in the reader and produces a sobering effect; the reader identifies with him, and this is the best tradition which may be offered to one’s contemporaries, not to mention the \([sic]\) posterity. […] [It is] the tone of an individual who does not let anyone impose the status of a victim on him; an individual free of [an] exceptionality complex.\(^{87}\) Brodsky’s admiration for Dovlatov belies a generally pessimistic outlook about the state of the Russian tradition with respect to its task of offering a pattern to future generations and, more
specifically, offering a hand to the man at the end of his rope. Dovlatov is among seventeen contemporary writers listed toward the end of “Catastrophes in the Air” as names the American reader should know, if only for the “momentary catharsis or comic relief” they offer. Brodsky apologizes for the perfunctory treatment, noting the list’s resemblance to an airplane’s manifest after a disaster. “But that’s precisely where a catastrophe has occurred,” he adds: “in the air, in the world of ideas.”

88 Less Than One 299-300.
Conclusion

The reader has surely recognized a number of recurring themes and concerns among the three writers featured in these chapters, and he or she has also surely noticed important differences in emphasis, approach, and opinion. Although these differences are quite stark on some subjects, readers will also have recognized some areas of agreement. One strong determinant of how each of these writers attempts to answer a range of questions is the particular way in which he understands the notion of “realism” in literature and, more fundamentally, how he answers the question “What is real?” Where do we find reality? Does it lie in the invisible world of ideas, or is it in the coarse tangibility of the natural order? A related question, one especially important to a writer, is whether language can convey the truth of that reality and, if so, how.

Most obviously, the relation of each of these authors to realism was first evinced in an opposition to the doctrine of Socialist Realism, the primary manifestation of literary Realism in Polish, Czech, and Russian literature in the middle of the twentieth century. Both Miłosz and Kundera were directly affected by its official establishment, and it still had a firm, if loosening, grip on the officially sanctioned literature of the Soviet Union when Brodsky was a young poet. Miłosz emigrated to avoid having to yield to its formal and ideological constraints; Kundera wrestled with those constraints until they themselves began to yield; and Brodsky became convinced that they pointed to essential problems with literary Realism more generally, a belief that informed his understanding about the broad tradition of Russian fiction.

If the three are united in their opposition to Socialist Realism in particular, their response to realism generally is more complicated. While there is little overlap in their particular philosophical concerns, Kundera and Brodsky both regard the formal limitations of literary
Realism as a methodological straightjacket, and they regard the liberating devices of Modernism as a means of broadening literature’s epistemological horizons. Miłosz, by contrast, largely considers Modernism’s formal experimentation and its focus on the authorial subject to be a noisy distraction from the serious business of understanding human existence in the world of phenomena and man’s responsibilities as a social creature. For all three writers, what is at stake is something much larger than the dictates and conventions of one literary method or another. All three are concerned with the problem of discerning a deeper reality than is readily apparent. And, while their commitments to their native literatures are demonstrated in different ways and in varying measures, each writer makes claims about the relative ability of his respective literature to achieve that deeper discernment.

Of the three, Joseph Brodsky has the most explicit argument with realism as a literary method. For Brodsky, Realist literature amounts to little more than typing; it reveals an utter preoccupation with content and a corresponding indifference to poetic form. Brodsky has so little respect for Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s Realist novels that he treats them as mere trial balloons for The Gulag Archipelago, in which the author is said to finally dispense with the artistic posture. For Brodsky, artistic material is only as good as its treatment by the artist, and the lived experience that generates that material is worth even less. Apart from its aesthetic failings, Brodsky claims that literary Realism is burdened by bad metaphysics, because its purpose is to make excuses for the world as it is. The eccentricity of this understanding is especially strange if we are used to thinking of realism as a willingness to grapple with unpleasant truths, a common enough understanding when in its earliest years Realist literature was regarded as a means of exposing social injustices. The key is that Brodsky regards the practice of dwelling on mundane historical trauma as a diversion from more essential disharmonies, whether temporal or eternal.
An artist mired in the allegedly pedestrian concerns of the traditional Realist novel is thus morally implicated in literature’s metaphysical failings. The poor artistic “ear” that is said to afflict Tolstoy and Turgenev prevented them from preparing their readers for the metaphysical reality of the twentieth century—a verdict that Brodsky’s Dostoevsky distinctly escapes.

Milan Kundera’s more measured argument with Realism comes in the form of an implicit polemic with György Lukács, the Marxist theorist of the novel and defender of Realism’s legacy. Lukács claimed that the Realist novel, with its capacity for representing and confronting objective reality, was the only form capable of providing a basis for Socialist literature. At a time when the disruptions of Modernism had relegated Realist works to artistically peripheral genres such as popular and didactic fiction, Lukács sought to restore the grand European Realist tradition that had responded to the French Revolution and that stood at the center of the “bourgeois” revolutions of 1848. The themes and devices of Modernism—regarded by its practitioners as a means of reaching deeper into reality—were to Lukács the very opposite: a bag of tricks adept at recording superficial and subjective impressions, but inadequate for an objective understanding of history’s progress. Unlike Brodsky’s approach, Kundera’s resistance to this essentially materialist argument is itself entirely materialist. His appeal to Czech writers to avail themselves of ordinary Modernist tools such as interior monologue and other “subjectivist” methods reflects a modern aspiration to dig deeper psychologically, not to mention the fear of being left behind by the train of the “large context.”

Kundera’s conversion from the Francophone modernism of his youth to the modernism of Kafka and other “poets of the novel” meant a renunciation of the romanticism that had produced the Surrealists. Like the Surrealists, he wrote, Kafka wished to discover what lay beyond the confines of realism, but he was “impervious to seduction by the lyrical” and he
focused entirely on what existed in the real world.¹ Nevertheless, Kundera’s continued admiration for the earthy surrealist undercurrents that survived and fed the postwar Czechoslovak cultural underground are revealed in his esteem for a writer such as Pavel Řezníček. These sympathies might be explained by the peculiar nature of the Czech Surrealists, who are distinguished by their comparatively positive relation to physical reality and who, according to the postwar Surrealist Vratislav Effenberger, regard imagination as a “reaching through to the dynamic core of reality.”² Like many of this dissertation’s ostensible turnings-away from Realism, this one insists that it gets closer to reality in doing so.

Whatever room there may still have been for Surrealism in Kundera’s aesthetic universe following his “caesura,” his break with the subjectivism of the lyrical mode was complete. This is revealed perhaps most surprisingly in his essay on Dostoevsky, which introduces his Diderot adaptation, Jacques le fataliste. Kundera shows himself to be unwilling to see past the alleged brutality of Dostoevsky’s style, claiming that its logic elevates feeling over rational thought and that its ethos transfers the criterion for truth from without to within. Brodsky responded to the essay by declaring that Kundera’s rejection of Dostoevsky is a function of nothing more than his own epistemological limitations. Here it is interesting to note Czesław Miłosz’s language in an interview with Brodsky, in which he notes that it is only by living that one comes to understand notions such as good and evil, which is to say that these notions “can be discovered only empirically.”³ It is a paradoxical usage, empiricism being normally associated with phenomena that can be observed and measured objectively, and it both subverts the prejudice that favors scientific truth over other modes and affirms the idea of transferring knowledge of the world through subjective means, such as literature.

³ Cynthia L. Haven (ed.), Czesław Miłosz: Conversations (Jackson, MS, 2006), p. 98
Miłosz, who left Poland in 1951 in order to avoid enlistment as a scribe of Socialist Realism, later endorsed his uncle Oscar Milosz’s pronouncement that poetry’s proper task is “the passionate pursuit of the Real.” Milosz the uncle had meant that the poet bears a sacred responsibility to elevate the soul of man and to better understand his fate. Milosz the nephew agreed, and he lamented poetry’s decadent retreat from the world of meaning into the subjectivist cult of the artist. At the same time, he was dismayed by the cold objectivity of Robinson Jeffers, whose poetic voice arose from somewhere far outside the human circle. Man was at the center of Miłosz’s poetics, and he was intrigued by William Blake’s brave rearguard action against the encroachments of science, whose hierarchy of value subordinated the perceiving subject to the world of objective necessity. Miłosz believed that poetry could rediscover what is real only by shedding the embellishments of Modernism and restoring a poetics that returned social man to a place at its center.

Miłosz and Brodsky are united in their emphasis of the refusal of poets and their protagonists to accept the world on its own terms. Brodsky challenges Realists to transcend the trauma of Russian history and to discover a deeper reality. Miłosz traces the Promethean rebellions of Apollo Korzeniowski, of his son Joseph Conrad, and of Conrad’s namesake, the hero of Mickiewicz’s Dziady. If, as Miłosz suggests, these are revolts not against Providence itself, but against the lesser god Necessity, then perhaps it is proper to call them revolts not against reality but against what appears to be reality. Such a discovery would vindicate Stanisław Brzozowski’s Poles, whose understanding of history was “premised on the near certitude that the world is in appearance a sorrow and in reality a joy.”

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