

Research Article

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Czesław Miłosz's Migrant Perspective in *Rodzinna Europa* [Native Realm]

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Abstract: The article traces the impact of Czesław Miłosz's first American stay on his image of Central Europe in *Rodzinna Europa* [Native Realm]. In the United States, the post-war immigrant from Vilnius learned to perceive, understand and evaluate American culture; he also gained a new perspective on his region of Europe and Slavic immigrants. This experience enabled him to adopt an American point of view in his autobiographical essay. Following William Faulkner, Miłosz carries on an analysis of Eastern and Central Europe's history and identities. The uses Western historical and sociological glossary to describe processes that formed his "native realm." Analogically, the poet from pre-war Vilnius reflects on American multi-ethnicity and religious diversity from a Central European perspective. In *Rodzinna Europa*, Miłosz takes the position of a migrant translator and a two-way mediator between East and West.

Keywords: Poles in the United States in the 20th century, Eastern and Central Europe in Western perception

Czesław Miłosz first used the expression *rodzinna Europa* ("native Europe") in his poem "Central Park," which he wrote in 1946 during his first visit to the U.S. This expression, subsequently used as the title for his autobiographical prose volume (published in English as *Native Realm: A Search for Self-Definition*), reveals Miłosz's thinking about Europe. His conception of the Old Continent committed him to a search for unifying qualities and a distrust of traditional divisions which split Europe into isolated nation-states and cultures. Seeing Europe as a community of regions enabled Miłosz to identify global differences between the continents and gauge the nature and degree of the influence which different civilisations exerted upon each other. Miłosz developed this outlook through an engagement with American authors who stressed the unity of the Old World as a counterpart for the unity of the New World. This perception of the Old Continent informs *Rodzinna Europa*.

One of Miłosz's distinctive experiences during his first stay in America was gaining an insight into the situation of Poles in the New World. He became acquainted with members of the Polish diaspora in the U.S. and realised that, for the most part, they remained ignorant of how their country of origin was being perceived in America. During his business trips in the U.S., he met Polish immigrants of different ages, occupational backgrounds and social circumstances. He recorded these encounters in letters, official reports for the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and essays for the Polish journal *Odrodzenie* [Renaissance].

The Polish diaspora, as it emerged from Miłosz's observations, included mostly people who were poorly educated, of a low economic and professional status, largely inactive in public life and slow to climb up the American social hierarchy. Miłosz compared the fortunes of immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe to those of black people in America and noted a number of regrettable similarities between them (Nowak [Miłosz], "Życie w USA" [Living in the USA] 7, 4).¹ The descendants of the Polish economic migrants in the provinces and big industrial cities did not, in Miłosz's view, communicate with the elite of the Polish post-

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

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war immigrant community, who lived closer to the U.S. cultural centres and formed a sort of ethnic ghetto in its own right. Miłosz was quick to criticise the Polish intellectuals and artists for their failure to confront, and engage with, contemporary civilisation, preferring instead to adhere to an out-dated notion of being European. In his report for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he commented:

The old immigration, that is to say, peasants transformed into the lower middle class, hardly come within my sphere of activity. It is quite a numerous group, but consisting mostly of old people (almost all of young people are purely American). Their intellectual level is very low and their financial resources, contrary to what is believed back home, are extremely limited. The same applies to their political influence. . . . Americans of Polish extraction can make a valuable contribution to Polish-American relations, because, unlike their parents in the "Polish ghetto," they sometimes occupy important positions. (Miłosz, *Situational Report on Moods* 1-2)

Miłosz sought out individuals such as Józef Wittlin, who supported initiatives to bring Polish and American cultures closer together. Although Miłosz managed to break through to this relatively small group, he understood that it was not representative of the Polish immigrant community as a whole and was not seen as such by American society at large. The financial difficulties of Polish immigrants and the Polish government's bad press in the American newspapers made it increasingly difficult for representatives of the Polish community to reach out to the American public and sustain its interest in the country associated with an indolent minority prone to self-imposed isolation. Miłosz became keenly aware of the image of Poland which circulated in America and examined the American stereotype of a Pole. This, in turn, allowed him to acknowledge that, for the average American, he would be either a person from nowhere or, at best, an arrival from a sleepy parochial hollow in Europe. Caught between a conservative elite and the working class concentrated in ethnic ghettos, Miłosz sought to bring Poland closer to Americans.

A veritable bane of Miłosz's publicity on Poland's behalf was the effort to respond to the Polish reputation for anti-Semitism. He complained in a letter to Zofia and Tadeusz Breza in 1946:

[y]ou have no idea what we have to put up here on account of the idiotic anti-Jewish affairs in Poland. The word "Pole" is slowly becoming synonymous with the word "Nazi," and anti-Semitism in Poland provokes a stronger outrage than what went on in places like Oranienburg and Auschwitz. Hardly anyone here cares what the Polish government thinks about it; it is Polish people who are being accused. (Miłosz, *After the War* 528)²

Miłosz repeatedly returned to this theme in his official reports for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In one of his serialised pieces "Życie w USA" [Living in the USA] for *Odrodzenie*, Miłosz commented at length on a tendentious portrayal of Poles in American letters, mentioning in particular C. Burney's *The Dungeon Democracy* and I. F. Stone's *Underground to Palestine*.

Explaining the nuances of Polish-Jewish relations became even more difficult after the Kielce Pogrom in 1946. In his report for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Miłosz berated the fact that giving talks about the extermination of Jews during World War II was becoming impossible in the circumstances. He acknowledged that the *New York Times* and *New York Herald Tribune* had published accounts of the Kielce Pogrom which it would be hard to question as inaccurate (Miłosz, *Situational Reports on Moods* 2). Miłosz was even more piqued when he commented on European accounts of the same matter, such as J. P. Sartre's *Portrait of the Anti-Semite*.

It would be difficult to prove that the Jewish theme in *Native Realm* was a conscious response to the charge of Polish anti-Semitism that Miłosz had encountered in America during his first stay. In his comments on pre-war Vilnius in *Rodzina Europa*, Miłosz invariably emphasised that it was a Polish-Jewish city, so that a description of the relations between the neighbourly communities, bound together by centuries of common history, featured quite understandably in his account of the country of his childhood. The American experience did, however, shape a new sensibility in Miłosz, which enabled him to shed additional light on

² In a different passage, Miłosz writes: "Poland is more despised for antisemitism here than Germany." (Miłosz, *After the War* 542).

the local Polish-Jewish relations in the chapter on ethnicities in *Rodzinna Europa*.³ Miłosz openly admitted that he owed his deeper understanding of Polish-Jewish relations to the books he read in English during his stay in the U.S.

In his selection of themes for *Rodzinna Europa*, Miłosz was guided by what he understood western Europeans and American to know, or rather imagine, about the Slavs. In the correspondence dating from his period of diplomatic service in America in the late 1940s, Miłosz wrote about the challenge of having to refute the generalisations through which he was being perceived, as a kind of composite incarnation of various Slavic stereotypes. This form of perceptual bias, familiar from the study of intercultural communication, was a source of dismay and embarrassment in everyday life for Miłosz. This makes it more plausible to believe Miłosz when he said in an interview with Renata Gorczyńska that the impulse to write *Rodzinna Europa* stemmed from:

[a] desperate desire to communicate to the Western reader a certain set of basic data, to explain what it is like to come from the other, lesser, part of Europe, and what historical complications you are bound to live with if you are from there. (Gorczyńska 156)

In parallel with his appreciation of the experience of Polish immigrants in America, Miłosz also began to shed his pre-existing mythical notions of America and thus to open himself to America in its newness and particularity. In this connection, he discovered the totalising influence of American civilisation and felt it particularly strongly in big cities with their comprehensive urban planning. He discussed the spread of functionality of the American civilization transferred into the cultural realm in *Notatnik amerykański* [American Notebook] and noted how the principle of mechanical reproduction in architecture and the design of transport systems was easily carried over to people's life-styles. Miłosz saw the American city-dwellers as repeating the fixed set of activities and behaviours characteristic of the daily rhythm of work. Despite undeniable differences in gender, age and race, Americans seemed to Miłosz to form only a superficially diverse society. In his view, they resembled Witkacy's uniform automatons, and their cities were like communities of doppelgangers. He regarded the inhabitants of American metropolises with empathy, noting that they were, in his eyes, becoming essentially the same under the pressure of economic laws, technological advancement and the expansion of popular culture.

Miłosz described this drive towards sameness in terms evocative of Darwinian adaptation. Immigrants to the U.S. from various parts of the world were prepared to renounce their separateness in favour of uniformity as a sign of the kind of social mobility which they had only dreamed about in the home countries of poverty and humiliation. The high price of being a citizen of the New World was, however, considered by Miłosz as a manifestation of American's peculiar demons. He observed that the basis of civil co-existence in America was a form of forgetfulness, the deliberate failure to remember traumatic experiences, especially those occasioned by the recent war. The river of forgetfulness in which immigrants bathed upon arrival had, for Miłosz, its most potent source in Hollywood, which is why he was also interested in the mechanisms of American popular culture as early as in the 1940s. The lost memories of the country of origin were thus replaced by practical knowledge necessary for coping in the new circumstances. The chances of survival in America were to be measured, in Miłosz's reckoning, in terms of a willingness to accept self-denial and the inevitable loss of the native inheritance. The foreigner entered the New World only at the price of a partial or complete loss of identity.

These observations inspired Miłosz to ask questions about the future of Western civilisation under American leadership. Miłosz saw the post-war division of influence between Europe and America as analogous to the historical relationship between Greece and Rome. He was emphatic and to the point in his critique of American popular culture and carefully unmasked the underlying workings of the press market and the circulation of knowledge. This led him to think that the overall process of forming American

³ It is worth noting that Miłosz provided a preface to Aleksander Hertz's *Żydzi w kulturze polskiej*, which was published in Polish in 1961 by the Instytut Literacki [The Literary Institute] in Paris, and in English translation in 1988 as A. Hertz, *The Jews in Polish Culture*. Translated by Richard Lourie. With a Foreword by Czesław Miłosz. Editor Lucjan Dobroszycki, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, IL, 1988.

citizens in a uniform mould was, somehow, subject to deliberate control, which explains his intensive reading of Huxley and Witkacy at the time. Miłosz's focus on remembrance in *Rodzinna Europa* should accordingly be seen as motivated by two distinct concerns: the urge to record the recent wartime experience and the desire to resist the illusion of a completely fresh start for immigrants in America. Miłosz's rationale for commemorating his native realm through literary writing was thus twofold: to create a new awareness of it in the West and to present and defend a distinctive composite identity. In addition to Miłosz's concern with American uniformity, he was also fascinated by two particular communities in America which were, for him, uniquely authentic, in being resistant to the drive towards sameness: the blacks and the native Americans.

Miłosz's increasing exposure to life in big cities and his exploratory trips throughout the U.S. led him to reassess his initial view of America. This revaluation culminated in the claim that America was, at its heart, provincial and that the truth about it was to be discovered in the lives of farmers and inhabitants of small towns. Once again drawing on an ancient analogy, he modelled the relationship between America's urban centres and its periphery on that between the capital city of Rome and its provinces. In his essay for *Odrodzenie*, he wrote:

[t]he myth of America . . . seems to consist in talking about the centre while forgetting about the periphery. It is a very big centre indeed. . . . But let U.S. not forget that the periphery does not merely include the blacks and the South. The periphery of the U.S. also encompasses all of South and Central America, the whole continent. (Nowak [Miłosz] "Życie w USA" [Living in the USA] 31, 6)

America afforded Miłosz an opportunity more fully to comprehend the contemporary world. In his imagination, the entire globe contracted to the size of an apple. He considered that the same underlying values circulated throughout Western civilisation, but they were refracted through different local prisms. In the same way, the echoes of the same processes spread in different directions from a single centre. If the world under American leadership was becoming an ever-closer union of common interests and ideas, the regional repository of memory became ever more important as a marker of identity. As a result, the provincial gained increasing significance in Miłosz's thinking. If a particular community, distant as it is from the centre, participates in the joint circulation of ideas, its contribution to that common inheritance must not, in Miłosz's view, be ignored. Apart from Adam Mickiewicz and Oscar Miłosz, he was also helped in developing this view by his engagement with the work of William Faulkner, an author then still completely unknown in Poland. In 1947, Miłosz devoted one of his *Odrodzenie* pieces to Faulkner's personality, artistic method and prose output. This is how Miłosz described Faulkner's creative personality:

[t]here is something in Faulkner of the archivist who reconstructs the facts by trawling through old records, citing private memoirs, listening to the tales of old people. Very often his novels start in the present and then go back in time to the source, to the beginning of a family, village or town. Sometimes events are presented only as the traces they left in the history of a particular community . . . What is peculiar to Faulkner is the quality of writing in two layers. The first layer: human drama, psychological and moral analysis. The second layer: a great sociological treatise about a county in the American South, a work of the kind that no expert sociologist would be able to undertake. (Miłosz, *Rodzinna Europa* 167-68)

In his surveys of American literature, Miłosz consistently singled out Faulkner as the most significant contemporary writer in the U.S. At that stage of Miłosz's life and artistic career, Faulkner was his secret ally in developing a conception of literature's origin and destiny. Miłosz's artistic views not only changed as a result of the time he had spent under the Nazi occupation in wartime Poland but also continued to evolve in response to his American experience. The two key aspects of this evolution were, as set out above, an understanding of the impact of mass culture on the human imagination and insight into the dialectic of centre and periphery. It was in America that Miłosz became more deeply convinced that history consisted of individual human histories in which common experience was given a specific local shade.

Rodzinna Europa can also be read as composed of two layers: the factual and the sociological. Miłosz described his method in the following terms:

[t]here is no obstacle to this way of proceeding: instead of foregrounding the individual, to be concerned first of all about the background and to look at yourself as an object of sociological study. The individual's interior experience, as retained in the memory, will then be evaluated from the perspective of the changes which the surrounding environment had undergone. (Miłosz, *Rodzinna Europa* 16)

Both layers of Miłosz's essay were designed to include, among its intended audience, readers from outside Eastern Europe, as well as Slavic readers living in the West who, having no support to lean on in personal memory, might struggle to define their identity.⁴ In the factual layer, one of Miłosz's strategies was to place local events in the context of a global historical chronology. For example, in discussing the emancipation of serfs in Russia after the partition of Poland, Miłosz noted that it coincided with the American Civil War. He juxtaposed the position of the impoverished Eastern European nobility, which at the beginning of the 20th century formed the local intelligentsia, with that of the landowners in the American South after the Confederate defeat. He added: "[i]t was no accident that I mentioned Faulkner. The atmosphere of his books is much closer to U.S. than that of Balzac's or Zola's. As in the Southern states, the balance of the whole community had suddenly been disturbed" (Miłosz, *Rodzinna Europa* 41). Placed in a new context, the events in Eastern Europe were thus presented by Miłosz as evidence for the common course of social and cultural processes in mutually distant parts of the world. In this way, the protagonists of Miłosz's family chronicle also appeared in a new light:

I inherited not only the distant past but also the past that was on the cusp of turning into the present moment: Bleriot's flight over the English Channel, ordinary people's Fords in America, cubism and the first abstract paintings, Max Linder's films, the Japanese War of 1905 . . . (Miłosz, *Rodzinna Europa* 28)

Miłosz drew freely on Anglophone history in presenting an account of his own region's fortunes. He used the English concept of a "Commonwealth" to describe the Polish-Lithuanian union state. This conceptual borrowing was intended to assist the Western reader in understanding the union of the two nations and, at the same time, to point to an analogy in European political history. Miłosz's use of the relevant vocabulary made it easier for him to see the situation of his ancestors as the outcome of colonial policies implemented in his part of Europe no differently from Britain or Spain. In this regard, Miłosz was a precursor of a post-colonial perspective on the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and its literature as subject to colonisation from Poland and Russia.

In his descriptions of the contemporary world, Miłosz applied a similar technique: he used global sociological vocabulary to illuminate local phenomena. He compared the position of European peasants at the end of the 19th century to that of American slaves. The changes in the social fabric of European society in the early 20th century were presented in his account as a result, at least in part, of American influences, in particular, the plebeian disdain for aristocratic titles and, more generally, distinctions of rank.

Miłosz's desire to incorporate his part of Europe into the context of Western culture and history, with America as its integral part, was also in evidence when he discussed Eastern Europeans' part in the global cultural exchange. A superficial symptom of this exchange was, in Miłosz's view, the fashion in Eastern Europe for Western cinema and literature. A more immediate, first-hand, experience of America made it possible for Miłosz to test the myth of the New World, which he had constructed through reading books and seeing films, and also to gain a deeper insight into Europe. It was a revelation for him to see that both American and Lithuanian history was, at the bottom, a history of colonisation and could usefully be described in terms of a shared repertoire of concepts. Miłosz encountered the effects of colonisation on the American continent very early on and referred to them in his notebooks and journalism (Miłosz, *Kontynenty* 42-5). Those early analyses foreshadowed the more extended treatment of the same subject in *Zniewolony umysł* [The Captive Mind] and made their way into a number of passages in *Rodzinna Europa*. Following Oscar Miłosz, he referred to Lithuanians as the "Redskins" of Europe in his account of the conquest of Lithuania, its reception into Western Christendom, cultural colonisation and difficulties with asserting independence. The cultural panorama in which Miłosz situated the history of stubborn local peasants

⁴ Miłosz wrote: "[m]y situation in France in the 1950s was, to put it mildly, difficult. . . . I was confronted with the problem of my own identity. Were I to become a Western European or perhaps simply a citizen of the world?" (Miłosz, *Rodzinna Europa* 2001).

extended from Plato up to the Soviet invasion. In a cursory overview, Miłosz attempted to uncover the rules of aggression and the options for resisting it. As a witness to the European ferment of ideas in the early 20th century, however, Miłosz sought to maintain a spectatorial stance in his narrative, with the historical kaleidoscope displaying, at break-neck speed, a series of successive images. Miłosz took pains to avoid casting himself in the role of history's victim. Speaking of Europe *in statu nascendi*, he suggested that his experiences made him feel like a settler in the New World:

[w]hen I later read about the canvas-covered wagons of the colonists setting out for the Far West and the attacks of the Indians, I was not able to compare those adventures with what I had taken part in myself. The former exploits were colourful and exotic, the latter—grey and normal. But here too was a canvas-covered wagon and at the opening of this tunnel there was my mother's back. Here too there was the fording of rivers, stopping in the middle, whistling to urge the horses to drink. New landscapes constantly unfolded like a roll with images. (Miłosz, *Rodzinna Europa* 60)

During his initial stay in the U.S., Miłosz became convinced that America's deepest influence on the world were the lifestyle changes brought about as a result of the industrial revolution. He conceded, fairly enough, that Eastern Europe's contact with the West, and, in particular, with American modernity, had originally been mediated by Russia. This was particularly evident in his youthful reading:

[a]part from cinema and theatre, books held their ground in claiming my time. Internationally successful books were instantly translated and published, due mainly to admiration for what was happening abroad and snobbery, rather than because of quality. I moved from Jack London and Kipling to Joseph Conrad, and then I encountered a chaotic assemblage of covers, where various authors were neighbours of each other on an equal footing: Emil Ludwig, Stefan Zweig, Ilya Ehrenburg (then an emigrant), Upton Sinclair, Thomas Mann and Soviet authors such as Boris Pilnyak, Babel or Katayev. (Miłosz, *Rodzinna Europa* 73)

Miłosz did not get involved in recounting, in cold-war fashion, Russia's relations with its neighbours. His outlook on Russia was informed by his personal experience and first-hand acquaintance with America. The experience of Russia included, in his case, a linguistic aspect, which explained why Miłosz did not regard Russian as a foreign language. He had acquired it as part of his historical and cultural endowment, during his travels in Russia as a child. His first contact with Russia was almost like an initiation in a mystery and bore fruit in his independent view on the Soviet Union in his youth and as an immigrant. When Miłosz discussed, in *Rodzinna Europa*, changes in Russia in the early 20th century—another great westernisation—he compared the leap in industrial output and the expanding transportation network to the rate of America's economic growth. He also mentioned a peculiar Russian cult of the American taste in cultural matters, as evidenced by a great number of translations of Western literature into Russian. Miłosz went so far as to venture the claim that, but for Stalinism, Russia would be capable of competing with America.

The temptation to compare Russia and America in various respects was irresistible for Miłosz. This contrastive urge was further fuelled by his discovery of the mechanisms of shaping public opinion and the impact of popular culture on individuals' mindsets. Dwight Macdonald and his associates were already studying similarities between Soviet propaganda and media policy in the U.S. In the early years of the Cold War it was being suggested that correspondences between Soviet and American societies in this regard were more numerous and went deeper than might have been expected.⁵ As the editor of the anthology of translated essays on mass culture, Miłosz was thoroughly familiar with those issues.

Another domain of Miłosz's comparison of the Old and New Worlds in *Rodzinna Europa* was ethnic and religious diversity. In Miłosz's view, the American melting point tended to destroy ethnic specificity, as a distinguishing mark of human identity. He also wondered if a similar process has also been at work in his own region, even if it was spread over centuries and less accessible to inspection. In *Rodzinna Europa*, this theme was treated extensively and with thorough documentary support: Miłosz reached as far back as pre-Christian Lithuania and brought the narrative up to the pre-war years when the phenomenon of the ethnic

⁵ See the essays in Part V of *American and Soviet Society. A Reader in Comparative Sociology and Perception*. Edited by Paul Hollander (University of Massachusetts), Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliff, New Jersey 1969, pp. 360-76.

ghetto was equally in evidence in Vilnius and New York. Miłosz's description of his childhood as "a moving museum liable grotesquely to distort its own specimens" (Miłosz, *Rodzinna Europa* 81).

What Miłosz obtained in the U.S. during his first stay was a new vocabulary retrospectively to analyse ethnic and religious diversity in the native region during his youth. *Rodzinna Europa* ended up being suffused with a sense of regret that those invaluable concepts had not been available to Miłosz earlier on in his life. He recounted the unwritten rules of neighbourly life followed in Vilnius, and in speaking of the limits of social intelligibility, he might have had in mind New York with its division into ethnic and racial areas. In his account for the rules of morning prayer for Catholic students in his school, Miłosz noted the exclusion of Jews, Karaims, Muslims, Orthodox Christians and Protestants, which had seemed natural and self-explanatory to everyone at the time, not least as an obvious expression of respect in the face of the sacred.

Due to his upbringing in a society marked by ethnic and religious diversity, Miłosz found his feet in America and saw it as a continuation of the processes he had observed at home and was now able to describe more articulately. Cultural multiplicity was, for him, as much a feature of the New World as a mark of the historical development of European polities. In narrating the ethnic and religious divisions around Vilnius and throughout Lithuania in general, Miłosz was clear about the failure of colonial cultural policy in the Russian sector of partitioned Poland. The stubborn clinging of local minorities to their ethnic and religious customs was, for Miłosz, a sign of a continuous European tradition, which had for much longer had more to do with *Heimat* than with *Vaterland*. In America, membership in the new political community was, as Miłosz saw it, the coming true of a dream of a better life, and the gradual loss of cultural memory about the country of origin was not enforced by the state. If peaceful co-existence required citizens to renounce their religion and ethnic attachments, Miłosz was dismissive of this ideal. Quite the contrary, cultural diversity was, for him, a form of life-based not on indifference, but on a sense of being distinctive.

In *Rodzinna Europa*, America served as a neutral, positive and negative point of reference for Miłosz. The American perspective permitted him to consider the identity of a European from Vilnius in an enriched context. Having traced the historical processes which had shaped both Europe and America, Miłosz was aware of the extent to which they had also shaped him as an individual. The protagonist of *Rodzinna Europa* is thus a cosmopolitan faithful to his county, with a strong sense of a local contribution to the edifice of a common civilisation. His identity is a product of negotiation: it is constructed out of provincial experiences described in the idiom of the centre. How *Rodzinna Europa* was itself received in America is a separate question and, to use Miłosz's own expression, "a subject to let" (Miłosz "Subjects to Let" 1997).

(Translated by Wojciech Jajdelski)

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⁶ The two last entries refer to different issues of the same journal *Odrodzenie*.