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THE ANATOMY OF ENSLAVEMENT

Is there a clear borderline between a reasonable compromise, which, while allowing for the preservation of moral integrity makes allowance for the circumstances in which one acts, and an action which turns into a betrayal of values and of the ideals that one fosters, into a betrayal of people, who frequently happen to be one's friends, into a betrayal of truth, to which everyone is a witness? This question, formulated in many different ways, arises in many publications today. In some of them, the authors place it in the context of the concrete historical and social background of the Poland of the post-war period, considering the attitudes of the Polish intelligentsia to the suddenly changed conditions in which they suddenly had to live and work.

But what provokes the question about the meaning of their compromise today? In what way does this question concern the situation of the Poland of the nineties? The collapse of the Communist system has made us face the truth about the Polish culture of the past decades. The fact is that many (maybe most?) of the ones who fostered this culture were living in symbiosis with the totalitarian regime externally imposed upon the Polish nation. The fact is that they offered all their abilities and faculties to this regime in return for certain privileges and a chance to pursue their literary profession. Though many of them have now sunk into oblivion, some were and still are considered as great writers or poets. They enjoyed be-

ing labelled as authorities (in the moral sense as well), their literary output invariably remains on school reading lists, and their works often become the basis of film screenplays. Finally, these writers, active up to the present day, frequently do not limit their undertakings to the purely literary. They are continually present in the mass-media, they speak on problems of vital moral importance to the Polish people, and they often consider themselves as the spiritual leaders of the nation.

Can (or maybe should?) we forget the fact that these same people were similarly present in Polish cultural life during the past decades, when the official interpretation of what was true was so very different – not only from truth itself – but also from what is generally assumed as true today? Was their public presence – commonly referred to as a “compromise” – during the years of an absent, silent majority of Poles not so much a compromise, but a loss of face (disgrace)? Or could their attitude perhaps be qualified as a reasonable golden mean, thanks to which Polish culture received a certain chance during those dreadful years, if not to develop, then at least to survive?

One common answer to the question about the limits of such a compromise seems to be suggested by three recent publications on the problem of the collaboration of Polish intellectuals (men of letters in particular) with the totalitarian Communist regime. These books are:

Homeland Disgrace by J. Trznadel¹, *Between Compromise and Betrayal* by S. Murzański², and *Charms of the Court* by W. P. Szymański.³ They offer the reader a presentation of the historical context of the Stalinist and post-Stalinist period in Poland, and an analysis of the sources and motives of the mental enslavement of the intellectuals, together with a certain definition of it. While taking up the problem of submission to the pressure of the system, the authors point to the varying extent and form of enslavement in the respective cases of different intellectuals. They simultaneously make an attempt to address and evaluate individual cases of collaboration with the regime. Finally, they show the consequences of this enslavement for culture, for the national awareness of Poles, and for the writers themselves.

Although both the style and the form of these publications are different (historical and literary narrative in the book by Murzański, quasi-literary approach in the case of Szymański, and a series of interviews with the actual participants in the event by Trznadel), the three authors seem to draw similar conclusions, so their books can be treated as a whole.

COMPROMISE AS HISTORICAL NECESSITY?

The condition of Polish culture after 1954 was a direct result of the previous German and Soviet occupations of Polish territory. Both occupations were cruel,

and brought about enormous devastation of the Polish population and cultural heritage. One effect of this devastation was seen in the growing deterioration of the structures which had been used to serve society in the exchange of views and circulation of ideas. The situation was ultimately confirmed by the collapse of the Warsaw Uprising. Thus, the war contributed to the annihilation of the normal functions of society, which in turn was a result of the extermination of the Polish intelligentsia, the loss of such cultural centres as Vilnius or Lvov, and mass migration. The deciding factor, present throughout those changes, was the imposition of a satellite Communist government on Poland. Its scheme of enslavement included purging of libraries, closing of the frontiers, introducing an embargo on free ideas, and relentless persecution of the patriotic segment of society. After the war, the Polish people, who were longing for normal life, received instead the post-Yalta order, together with an existence of no hope and no perspective.⁴ Many writers interviewed by Trznadel describe that situation. Z. Kubikowski says:

“We were listening to their conversations, and they were simply conversations about keeping up on the job. They were saying that one had to live on something. That it would last. That it could last forever. In Russia it had already lasted for 40, no, for 30 years by then... That meant you had to be set up in life, because it was the world that would last, and no other world would be given to you. The point was to be set up so as to defile yourself to the smallest extent

¹ Jacek Trznadel, *Hańba domowa. Rozmowy z pisarzami*, Lublin 1990, 339 pp.

² Stanisław Murzański, *Między kompromisem a zdradą. Intelktualiści wobec przemocy 1945-56*, Warsaw 1993, 272 pp.

³ Wiesław P. Szymański, *Uroki dworu (Rzecz o zniewalaniu)*, Cracow 1993, 125 pp.

⁴ See: Trznadel, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-39

possible ... So you started the never-ending compromises.”⁵

Even Z. Herbert, one of the few who did not give in to the pressure of the system, states:

“During the Stalinist period I thought it would last longer than my lifetime. I was absolutely convinced of it. So was [Leopold] Tyrmand, and so were those few, two or three friends I had in Warsaw, to whom I could talk. So you had to emigrate spiritually [...] it did not require much effort.”⁶

The question appears in this context of how much talent was lost, how many were murdered, how many were simply wasted due to external factors, such as submission to the atmosphere of helplessness, spiritual emigration or acceptance of compromise in order to secure a living. How sad J. Trznadel's statement sounds – that he is not at all sure that the greatest talents were active in Polish post-war literature and culture.⁷ Gombrowicz seemed to share this opinion, saying that he knew some writers who collaborated with the regime, who were mostly persons of mediocre intelligence and narrow horizons.

“It was easy for them to fabricate a moral and ideological countenance ... Driven into a tight corner by the historical moment, they promptly assumed the new image, they smoothly assimilated the new faith.”⁸

SOURCES AND MOTIVES OF ENSLAVEMENT

It seems that most of Trznadel's interlocutors, as well as the intellectuals about

whom Murzański and Szymański write, represent various personality types; the particular motives on which they were acting were not identical, either. However, one can trace a certain similarity in their attitudes and in the choices which they made. Their original alliance with the new reality inevitably changed into subservience to the establishment and its ideology, which frequently resulted in the writer's loss of individuality and in his entrance into the uniform government structures.⁹ As A. Braun explains: “There was a growing pressure on young penmen to reject their Home Army tradition and praise a new situation [...] There was pressure in it, and we must take heed of that moment depriving us of our authenticity. We were made into regime writers, impersonal writers. For example, my poem should not be different from Wiktor's. Or Borowski's short story from that by Wygodzki.”¹⁰

Thus, the effect of the attitudes adopted by these intellectuals was far from what they intended. Though the basic source of enslavement in many cases was the fact that writers were terrified of the prospect of remaining outside the literary market, the paradoxical result of this attitude was their loss of independent thinking. In this way, they lost the very basis of what constitutes the writer's vocation. According to Trznadel, the disgrace of these writers is not their wish to be present in public life, which is characteristic of any penman, but the price they paid for that presence: the fact that being a presence in society and in the literary market – controlled more and more by the authorities – required a compromise with and a bowing to deceitful and des-

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁸ M u r z a ń s k i, *ibid.*, p. 182.

⁹ T r z n a d e l, *ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

otic reality, for the mere reason that it surrounded the writer from the outside.¹¹

However, the very mechanism of enslavement was not this clear, particularly for those subjected to it. Though psychological factors were certainly at work, they were accompanied by an intellectual fashion for leftist ideologies, prevalent all over Europe at the time. According to Murzański, the psychological factor which most likely dominated these individuals was the tendency, when unable, or lacking enough courage to face reality, to take a course of action which projects one's own image of the reality, to choose from the reality that which one actually wants to see in it, and thus creating the image of the reality which is most suitable at the moment.¹² This to an extent natural tendency to escape from what is difficult was at that time complemented with the growing popularity of leftist ideologies, with the praise of progress carried by history, with the "Hegelian bite," which resulted in the introduction of the dialectical category of historical necessity in place of the classical conception of truth and falsehood. Also, the phenomenon of radicalism characteristic of the Polish intelligentsia, many of whom had been subject to leftist influences already before the war, favoured this passage over to the side of the Communist government. It is no wonder that in the light of this radicalism, the programme introduced by the communist regime not only seemed acceptable, but even created a certain mood of progressiveness. The failure of the writer to participate in this progressiveness would condemn him to remaining behind, to missing the meeting with reality. As W. Wirpsza says: "The

second problem was the radicalism of the Polish youth in the thirties, which became even stronger during the occupation. The more so as the Communists proposed a programme of social reforms, e.g. land reform, education reform, nationalization of pivotal industries, etc., which were considered as badly needed by most people in Poland, even by the liberals. There was no defiance here, it went on as smoothly as cutting butter with a hot knife."¹³

In this context, Murzański wonders whether the enslavement of the *literati* was not, to a certain extent, also a kind of seduction, if even Cz. Miłosz, a man of such great calibre, comments on the tragedy of the soldiers of the Polish underground Home Army, which took place right in front of his eyes, by calling it – in his book "The Captive Mind" – "an example of the ironic jokes of history." It was easier for the writer to eliminate human tragedy both from his own and from his reader's mind and to present the situation of post-war Poland as the struggle of particular interest groups, than to face the substance of a national tragedy.¹⁴

Apart from the leftist movement widespread all over Europe at that time, there were also other factors which seriously influenced Polish intellectuals. As J. M. Rymkiewicz says, the propaganda was one-sided, censoring everything which concerned western culture; e.g. you could read and hear a lot about Sartre, yet Orwell was never mentioned.¹⁵ The omnipresent propaganda was accompanied by the element of intimidation in the case of those to whom it was not convincing enough. "There was an awareness of oc-

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹² See: M u r z a ń s k i, *ibid.*, p. 9.

¹³ T r z n a d e l, *ibid.*, p. 107.

¹⁴ M u r z a ń s k i, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

¹⁵ See: T r z n a d e l, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

cupation, of a worse occupation, since during the time when Poland was partitioned you were free to travel. And this time the annexation of Poland was accompanied by occupation. Another type of terror, but undoubtedly terror [...] of arrests at the workplace, of people who would disappear, of crowded trams, and of the nightmare of everyday life. There was pressure at every point.” (Z. Kubiowski)¹⁶ However, not everyone actually submitted to the propaganda and intimidation. Some were actually convinced about the rightfulness and independence of their attitudes. W. Woroszyński states: “I had the feeling then that it was really we who did everything. I did not feel that I was somehow forced into it, or prompted in what to do; I did not feel as if I were a puppet. Such an attitude would have rather caused my protest.”¹⁷

There was also a deeper background to the far-reaching compromise between the Polish *literati* and the regime. It was provided by the conviction, inherited from the period of modernism, that there is a type of intellectual (writer, scientist, artist) in the Polish reality who considers himself wiser than the common people, who is different from them by his life-style, and on these grounds demands special appreciation, respect or fame.¹⁸ J. Bocheński stresses this very point in particular, saying:

“My father represented the approach typical of modernists; his relationship to the world was such that he considered himself someone better than the people surrounding him, as was often the case in the nineteenth century. The artist, the «spiritual giant», embodied the under-

standing of something totally inconceivable for the dwarfs who surrounded him. I was raised in such an atmosphere, I was saturated with it [...]. So, also for me, the world was divided into the ones endowed with higher spiritual abilities on the one hand, and common earthly-minded bread-eaters, incapable of understanding the individuals of the former kind. As if God's Spirit was embodied in some, and not in the rest. It was obvious to me that a special mission was to be fulfilled by artists, writers, philosophers, etc. Also deeper wisdom and the true values were to be manifested by them. As if the fundamental conflict in human communities was between the chosen ones, endowed with the spirit, and the earthly-minded bread-eaters. And there is only one step from here to the discovery that the bread-eaters are maybe not the whole of society, but the bourgeoisie, this disgrace to the society. They represent dumb narrow-mindedness, greed, the striving for profit, the qualities hated by artists and intellectuals and ascribed just to the «terrible philistines». However, a chance for the mythical »working classes« appears.”¹⁹

In its striving for legitimization from the intellectuals, the new government in a way met the writers' expectations by keeping up the image they had of themselves, and by taking advantage of their desire to hold a position above all the rest of the society. According to Szymański, their wish to be present at Court led to their frequent exploitation by the Court for political aims. In this way, they often became the government's tools, which they were not always aware of.²⁰ Also Z. Herbert ironically confirms this

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹⁷ Trznadel, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

¹⁸ Szymański, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

¹⁹ Trznadel, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

²⁰ Szymański, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

opinion saying: "The artists were excited about the new government, as it was so simple, so easy to approach, so familiar. An invitation to the Warsaw Belvedere Palace, prizes, a conversation with Bierut. A strict master, yet a just one; made mincemeat of the underground army, but loves us [...] This «vanity fair» is certainly inherent in the atmosphere of the Varsoviète [...]. Those social contacts, one's own table at the State Publishing Institute Club, large editions, book signings, a flower in cellophane wrapping, public meetings, five thousand drowsy workers coming to applaud comrade writer. The conceit was growing. Nowhere in the world of real capitalism were writers doing so well. [...] For the writers' life was idyllic, though certainly based on the fear that one could slide down to the level on which ordinary people were living. Clubs, retirement homes, high standards, Mrs Nałkowska's literary salon, trips abroad. Breza joining diplomacy... [...] What did this government offer? Divine rank, the role of a demiurge. [...] So they suddenly felt the wheel of history in their hands, they felt that in a way it paid to lie to that dumb nation which deserved nothing but scorn."²¹

DEGREES OF ENSLAVEMENT

The question arises whether the writers really were unaware – until the very end – of the actual condition of Poland; whether the benefits which motivated their choices were really more important than the moral dimension of those choices. The more unaware they were, the greater the enslavement. Actually, there were different degrees of the writers' involvement in the service to the new

government. The older generation of writers, especially the ones who had returned from the Soviet Union (e.g. Putrament, Ważyk) as well as those who had already experienced the Soviet occupation earlier (e.g. Herbert), were conscious of the moral nothingness of the system, of its injustice, and of the enslavement it brought. On the other hand, the younger writers – not realizing so well what was really going on in the State – were attracted to the system by older writers who propagated it. J. Trznadel recalls this situation: "It concerns the influence exerted by such people as Kott or Żółkiewski on a certain circle of young people. This influence was strong. Our doubts about Stalinism or Soviet Russia were moved to the background by living authorities of this kind. Terrible harm was done."²² Rymkiewicz adds: "The older ones, today I can say «my friends», were guilty; yet it did not concern merely the writers. Thus, the whole Polish liberal intelligentsia was actually guilty [...]. It was guilty because it let itself be deceived, and, what is more, it deceived children like me."²³

Also the fact that the older generation of writers saw Fascism as the source of all the evil that affected Poland was conducive to the younger writers' submission to the enslavement. Due to this, the injustice of the Soviet system, scrupulously concealed by the institution of censorship, seemed also not to exist. The drawbacks were excused by the historic moment, and the young writers deluded into believing in the Polish way of building Socialism, or in the Polish way to Communism. Today, some of them (e.g. Strykowski) claim that they were unaware of

²¹ Trznadel, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 117.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

the evil of the system, that the disclosure of its iniquity in 1956 was a tragic surprise to them.²⁴

THE ESSENCE OF ENSLAVEMENT
IN THE BETRAYAL OF THE WORD

T. Murzański, J. Trznadel and W. Szymański do not confine themselves to a presentation of the writers' compromise with history. They also suggest a univocal moral judgement of this compromise. This is most clear in S. Murzański's book: he accuses the writers of the Stalinist period of having betrayed the Word, the free Word whose task is to grasp and comprehend the truth, and to make it the only law. It is a conscious betrayal of the Word, of truth, which in his opinion means true enslavement. This betrayal ultimately determined the attitude of the majority of Polish intellectuals after 1945 as a betrayal of the ethics of their professional ethos. Undoubtedly, one of its manifestations was the elimination of national problems from the literature of the historical period in which their presence was so badly needed, by means of an overwhelming mental coercion which was meant to deprive the nation of its identity. The betrayal was in the obliteration of the national experience through literature, and in the abuse of the nation's most precious concept, namely, patriotism. Thus, the truly patriotic attitudes of the younger generation, dedicated to the underground Home Army, were reduced to unhealthy emotions. Simultaneously, the literature of the day was profuse in patriotic phraseology in order to attain some immediate political aims.²⁵

The betrayal of the Word in describing the reality which directly surrounded

the writers, though bad in itself, was not the only result of their compromise with history. This betrayal affected also the very essence of the ages-old motivation of literature, namely, the grasp of moral problems. One of the symptoms of this situation was the "controversy about Conrad" in the Polish literary press. The protagonist of Conrad's works constitutes a kind of archetype of any literary protagonist: solitarily facing his vulnerability and the conflict between his will and the moral law, he is aware of his weakness, but in consequence puts truth above pragmatic self-interest and remains heroically faithful to this truth. Such a protagonist was incompatible with the propagated collective personality; his concern about internal rectitude and faithfulness to ideals, suggested rather the image of the young people involved in the underground resistance movement than the "Socialist man" aggressively propagated by the writers of the period. So, with substantial cooperation of the latter, an attempt was made to remove the true meaning of Conrad's works from the literary horizons of the young generation. Murzański says that the writers were aware of the actual ends for which their work was used, and despite this, some of them were even overzealous in their cooperation. Therefore, if we encounter attempts to explain such attitudes by historical necessity, or by an intention to rescue Polish culture, the conclusion irresistibly follows that betrayal of the Word turned out in their case to be the betrayal of the very reasons for which they made the compromise; it turned out to be a betrayal of their own identity and a betrayal of literature.²⁶

²⁴ Trznadel, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

²⁵ Murzański, *op. cit.*, pp. 49-54.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 45-53.

CONSEQUENCES OF ENSLAVEMENT

The long-lasting compromise between Polish writers and the alien ideology imposed on the Polish people had its consequences both for the writers and for society. Many of the writers active during that time have not written anything valuable since their break with the past (e.g. Dąbrowska), while almost all of them consider those years as wasted for their literary output. The very first victims of the lies were some writers of the younger generation, deluded by their older friends and subjected to the hard mechanism of uniformity.

S. Murzański, J. Trznadel and W. P. Szymański add that it was ultimately Polish society that suffered from the writers' betrayal more strongly than the writers themselves. While serving the Communists, these writers provided an intellectual framework for the system which – for such a long time – succeeded in concealing its moral nothingness. While humiliating the Polish tradition and the Home Army in the eyes of the nation, they simultaneously compromised the idea of resistance, or of any attempt to protest against the Communist lawlessness, all of which contributed to giving this system the appearance of legality and justice.

According to the three authors, the political crises of 1956, 1968, 1970, 1976 and 1980 turned out to be the time of awakening for many intellectuals. Influenced by the experience of the events which were taking place, many of them joined the political opposition, suddenly noticing that their service to the system could not have been anything but enslavement, for enslavement turned out to be a constitutive element of this system. It was then that many of them also started a new chapter in their presence in

the culture of the post-war Poland, by writing critical works about the official interpretation of Marxism, by publishing independently in unofficial printing houses, by signing letters of protest addressed to the government, and finally, by founding organizations to defend civil rights and freedom (the most dominant of these organizations was the Workers' Defence Committee). These intellectuals became active participants in workers' protest demonstrations, often serving as advisers. By opposing the regime in such a clear way, some of them freely condemned themselves to permanent absence from the mass-media, to persecution and repression by the government. All this must not be forgotten. Deprived of any possibility of public statement or rejoinder, they were often publically defamed and accused of common offences by the propaganda. M. Brandys says: "The persecutions which my family and my home were subjected to by the police during the years 1976 – 80 were much more brutal than the ones from before the war. And the short period of unemployment which I experienced before the war was nothing compared to the fact that today, after having pursued a literary career for forty years, I am practically deprived of the right to practise my profession"²⁷ (interview in 1985).

It seems as though the facts themselves were speaking: the penmen decisively turned their backs on the system which, at its rise, had so easily subdued them. Their previous capitulation to the enslavement for the sake of enslaving others was now replaced with a commitment to unmasking the system. These are facts with which it is hardly possible to argue. However, it is also worth confront-

²⁷ Trznadel, *op. cit.*, p. 243.

ing S. Murzański's opinion on the intellectuals' change of attitude during those crucial years. He proposes the hypothesis that if their withdrawal from the regime had been authentic and wholesome, it would have resulted in the very authors' confronting the Communist period in literature. However, such a confrontation has not been carried out: either from the moral or from the sociological point of view: "No book has been written which would honestly, or even merely to a certain extent, answer the questions asked about that gloomy time. Those who are actually *obliged* to clear the way for the truth about that evil period, about evil people and evil actions, either keep silent or talk in circles. One of the reasons for it is that it was the time of their illusory triumph and actual downfall."²⁸ Despite all the respect due to these Polish writers for their involvement in political opposition, we must not fail to note the fact that their internal change still lacks something, since it has in fact left no trace in literature. Many intellectuals simply stopped their literary career, others gave up national issues in their works, moving towards problems, called a bit euphemistically, "universal." Simultaneously, Murzański reminds us that "despite the change of their option, many intellectuals, bewitched with the dia-mat (dialectical materialism), were actually advancing from stage to stage in the way that school children advance from grade to grade, with marks for their conduct which are sometimes better and sometimes worse. One or another of them got rid of their Communist Party identity card at a subsequent turning point in history; however, no cases of medals being returned have been noted; they renounced

the views, but not the academic degrees, posts or privileges given to them in return for spreading those views. No one has withdrawn the falsehood or corrected the lies."²⁹ Z. Kubikowski, one of the authors active during the Communist period, seems to share Murzański's opinion: "What I dream about is detailed and searchingly accurate memoirs of the ones who didn't adopt the right attitude to protect themselves from the evil of the system. Of those who were ready to do it. For various reasons. I dream about books, stories, memoirs, about an attempt at reconstruction. Only then will we be able to comprehend more. Because, until now we have only learned that everyone was right. But why was everything not right? The answer is because certain people were actually not right. Why? How did it happen? Finding answers to these questions is a crucial matter, with which any healthy functioning of Polish literature, of Polish literary and historical awareness, must begin."³⁰

ADMONITION

Reading *Home Disgrace* by J. Trznadel, *Between Compromise and Betrayal* by S. Murzański, and *Charms of the Court* by W. P. Szymański is a sad experience. The facts and the anatomy of the writers' compromise with the post-war reality give an univocal answer to the question posed at the beginning: the borderline between compromise and betrayal is not clear. Actually, there are matters in which any compromise turns out to be betrayal, even if it were to be made with most noble intention. The literary men of the post-war period seem not to have remembered this principle, and many of them

²⁸ M u r z a ń s k i, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

²⁹ *Ibid.* p. 217.

³⁰ T r z n a d e l, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

made use of the rule which states that the end justifies the means. However, the result of this attitude turned out to be contrary to its very noble end, namely, saving Polish culture.

The three books by Trznadel, Murzański and Szymański are a warning for the intellectuals in today's Poland. They teach that any kind of public presence, every appearance in the press, radio, on television, or on the literary market, means addressing millions of people, and carries an enormous responsibility, and that the awareness of this must not disappear.

Being constantly, and in a way, professionally present in the intellectual or cultural life of the nation, intellectuals can easily start believing that they actually occupy a privileged position: that they are authorities who know all the right answers. Such a loss of responsibility can only be prevented if the intellectuals display a constant disposition to truth, and an attitude of humility towards it, which is what Trznadel, Murzański and Szymański seem to advocate.