

ELŻBIETA KIŚLAK

MERTON AND MIŁOSZ IN THE FACE OF TOTALITARIANISMS*

Both Polish and American publishers agree that Merton's correspondence with Miłosz is of exceptional importance. This opinion is shared by the editor of an ample epistolographical collection whose table of contents lists only the names of writers who corresponded with Merton.¹ What is perhaps more important, the correspondents themselves attached great importance to this conversation over a great distance. As Miłosz, already in his third letter, wrote: "you are for me important, I feel in you a friend with whom I can be completely frank"². From the very beginning their dialogue had rather intimate overtones, perhaps due to the authority of priesthood, which backed Merton up as a well-known author of spiritual books. Miłosz didn't hesitate to admit to his despair, past and recent mistakes, religious doubts, trouble at home. If one adds to that an intellectual dimension of the problems he presented in his letters, there can be no doubt that his correspon-

* Transl. by A. Muranty.

¹ *The Courage For Truth. The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers*, ed. C. M. Bochen, New York : Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993.

² *Striving Towards Being. The Letters of Thomas Merton and Czesław Miłosz*, ed. R. Faggen, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997, p. 44.

dence with Merton is one of the most important pieces of self-commentary on the past, as well as a rich source for the interpreters of his works, next to the letters he exchanged with Iwaszkiewicz, Andrzejewski, Wankowicz and Wat. The high temperature of discourse between Milosz and Merton caused the former to keep certain letters he had written with the intention of sending them to Merton. They are also published in the above-mentioned anthology, next to corrected versions and additions made by both parties.

Merton contemplated Milosz's letters with even greater reverence. As he wrote in a letter, he considered them to be the best, and it must have meant quite a lot coming from him, considering the variety, vastness and abundant wealth of his contacts. He added that they were "the hardest to answer",³ explaining why he had taken such a long time to answer. The meaning of these letters isn't connected with their frequency or regularity, there had been long breaks, sometimes several months, or even years, long. In the first two years they wrote to each other quite regularly, before Milosz moved to California; during that period they exchanged five long letters, each time waiting for a month or two for the post to reach across the Atlantic. In the following years their correspondence grew scarcer, and the breaks longer, yet their letters weren't replaced with personal contacts – Milosz managed to visit Merton at Gethsemani only once, on September 9th, 1964. In the last period their letters concerned publishing matters, those from 1968, the year of Merton's death, were often marked with haste and dealt only with practical matters. Nevertheless, they met in October 1968 in San Francisco to have dinner in a Chinese restaurant, although at the time they didn't realize that this meeting was, as Milosz later wrote, "so thoroughly leave-taking".⁴ Ten days before Merton's departure to the Far East they had a somewhat more intimate, long, friendly conversation in a café. Their last contact was a postcard sent by Merton on November 21st from Darjeeling, less than three weeks before his fatal accident.

Despite the rarity of their contacts they considered each other friends. "I liked him at first sight",⁵ Milosz sums up his visit to the monastery, at the same time betraying his previous reserve and fastidiousness. They had a lot in common – the same generation, a minor age difference – only three and

³ Ibidem, p. 135.

⁴ Cz. Milosz, *Życie na wyspach*, ed. by J. Gromek, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 1997, p. 211.

⁵ Ibidem.

a half years. They shared the fascinations of their generations, read the same French books – they were both greatly influenced by *Art and Scholasticism*. In Milosz's letters one can see traces of his practically ended discourse with Thomism, and it is probable that during his visit at Gethsemani Merton mentioned the other guest he exchanged letters with, namely Jacques Maritain. In his *Abecadło* Milosz says that he isn't certain how much his late friend drew from Thomism, stressing his attachment to "another medieval philosopher Duns Scotus".⁶ They were both sensitive to social injustice, a trait shaped in the thirties, marked by a deepening global economical crisis,⁷ and esteemed the same left-wing American magazine – *Dissent*.

Both of them witnessed the madness of the 20th century and declared peculiar aversion to nationalisms and the "nationality" section in the passport. Nevertheless, Milosz would probably think it too radical to say, as the protagonist of his favourite early Merton novel, *My Argument with the Gestapo*, says: "I lived in too many countries to have nationality, I love freedom",⁸ seeing as he values tradition integrated in language so highly, not to mention attachment to his lost small homeland. They were both individualists, yet searching for mutual friendship, suffering because of alienation, or rather intensely feeling their own separateness, the otherness of an artist. Milosz's seclusion was increased by his emigration, he blamed it on an inopportune moment at which he had decided to break away from the Polish socialist diplomatic service. In a number of letters he spoke of the critical mistake he had made in leaving the USA and honourably returning to Poland, which resulted in his stay in France, where he was unable to find his place among intellectual circles, being ostracised as an author of the anticommunist *Captive mind* and *persona non grata* in a number of circles which passed an unfavourable judgment on him, since on the Parisian "left bank" one's outlook was estimated precisely on the basis of one's view on

⁶ Cz. Milosz, *Abecadło Milosza [Milosz's ABC]*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1997, p. 171.

⁷ It seems to me that Milosz's views can be roughly presented by the self-characteristic of Daniel Bell, an American sociologist, translated by Milosz: liberalism in social solutions, conservatism in aesthetics, socialism in economics; while in *Ogród nauk* Merton's outlook is reduced to "American liberalism" (*Ogród nauk*, Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1979, p. 190).

⁸ Th. Merton, *My argument with the Gestapo*, p. 19 (the page number comes from the Polish edition: *Mój spór z gestapo. Dziennik makaroniczny*, przeł. A. Gomola, Poznań 1995).

communism. Milosz didn't hide his separation from Merton. However, there is no way of knowing if he realised how lonely Merton was in his monastic community, described in one of the letters as "exterior darkness", where he is "without companionship".⁹ In *Życie na wyspach*, outlining Merton's figure, he mentions merely that "communal style of monastic life wouldn't trouble him if it wasn't for all the storm he raised with his books"¹⁰ – nothing but a dark side of popularity.

Last but not least, they were both poets. The protagonist of *My Argument with the Gestapo*, who can be viewed as the author's *porte-parole* likes to call himself precisely that – a poet. Milosz had known Merton's name even before they established contacts, he came across and translated Merton's poem about St. Malachi for the American issue of *Kultura*. Notwithstanding, their poetics and poetical tastes differed significantly. Milosz preferred Anglo-Saxon poetry with its intellectual discipline to the uncurbed freedom of imagery of the Latin American poets, which Merton was so taken with; he had no liking for the baroque and surreal. He also claimed that Merton's style lacked sharpness: "a clear outline was emerging – only to become dissolved again",¹¹ and so went on to translate only one more poem *Elegy for Hemingway*. For Merton, on the other hand, fascinated with *The Captive Mind*, the identity of Milosz as a poet might have seemed of secondary importance, overshadowed by his essayistic achievements, especially in view of the fact that he must have taken it for granted, with only few pieces of evidence – excerpts first in French, only later on in English translation. He paid more attention to Herbert's poetry, which he mentioned several times, one may also doubt if Milosz could have been completely satisfied with his friend's complement: "your own poems are by no means the least interesting in the book"¹² – the anthology of Polish post-war poetry. He himself lamented a number of times the fact that in the West he is incidentally, and moreover falsely, known as a political writer and his relationship with Merton sprang from this misunderstanding, which, nevertheless, proved fortunate, since it initiated friendship.

Accordingly, they had a lot in common, yet there were just as many differences. Despite belonging to the same generation each had a different

⁹ *Striving Towards Being*, p. 122.

¹⁰ *Życie na wyspach*, p. 211.

¹¹ *Ogród nauk*, p. 190.

¹² *Striving Towards Being*, p. 159.

burden of historical experiences, which, in a way, became a source of Merton's fascination with *The Captive Mind* (incidentally coming a little late, since the American edition was published several years before, in 1953). Adversary to any war, including the cold one, convinced that "there are people there too, and they have souls as well", Merton wanted to comprehend the lot of those who lived behind the iron curtain. The book impressed him so much that he wished to share his enthusiasm with an unknown author.

For Milosz the spontaneous approval of *The Captive Mind* coming from a reader who at the same time represented the Church must have meant more than ordinary praise. The charge made the previous year by an influential critic Lionel Trilling¹³ was that the book overlooked the role of the Catholic Church in the countries of New Faith, which is why the brilliant essayistic argument was to deviate from the truth. When recommending *The Broken Mirror*, the recently published English anthology of new Polish fiction, Milosz directly stressed that he disagreed with his accusations, and a little further on admitted, not very consistently, that "A great lacuna in *The Captive Mind* is, it seems to me, lack of a chapter on the Church".¹⁴

Merton hasn't picked up this subject, for him this book was interesting particularly because of its narrowed, limited depiction, since it was one of the very few books to present the situation of a writer, intellectual and an artist in a communist country in an individual lot. Two cases, those of Alpha and Beta (i.e. Andrzejewski and Borowski), aroused his empathic compassion.

¹³ In an introduction to an English anthology of contemporary Polish fiction *The Broken Mirror* (New York, 1985, 4-5) Trilling wrote about *The Captive Mind*: "this is a work to be admired on several scores, but more than one trustworthy observer has said that it goes beyond the facts in representing the Polish intellectuals as having wholly and happily capitulated to the Communist *mystique*. There was, of course, quite considerable adherence to Communism on the basis of genuine conviction. But opportunism would seem to explain the adherence of some people, as no doubt prudence explains the consent of many more. The Catholic Church was indeed hard pressed by the government and quite effectually limited and controlled. But with the population almost entirely Catholic and inclined to be devout, the Church could not be liquidated and it served as a countervailing force". Then Trilling goes on to write about Poland being oriented towards the West, which must have destined all efforts aimed at sovietization of culture to fail, and indicates possibilities for survival of independent thought, anticipating Herbert's *Kwestia smaku [A Matter of Taste]*: "it was a situation that at least licensed the awareness of boredom and disgust, from which springs much energy of the intellectual and artistic life".

¹⁴ *Striving Towards Being*, p. 10.

In any case, he might have understood the whole thing as an idiosyncratic complement to his above-mentioned novel *My Argument with the Gestapo* – actually a fantasmatic autobiography presenting the protagonist's vicissitudes in wartime England and occupied France. In the *Captive Mind* he encountered a description of a totalitarian experience from another realm, that of real socialism, which must have been much more difficult to imagine. After many years Milosz will write in an outline of Merton's character: "his point of view was alien to mid-European experiences, although he was open enough to read about them and listen to them".¹⁵

Nevertheless, only this alien point of view allowed him to recognize Ketman's attitude as honest, and an admirable one at that ("that is certainly one form of honesty, and perhaps an admirable one"¹⁶), and not a means of adjustment or false consciousness. Although Merton knew the extent of pressure exerted by a totalitarian country (he has read *The Seizure of Power*) and had no illusions concerning Communist ideology, it appears that he found it difficult to reconstruct reality in the countries of New Faith, along with the social consequences of Ketman. Having read *The Broken Mirror* he admitted that matters which Polish writers are involved in are "quite alien"¹⁷ to him.

Irony seemed to him to be a sufficiently effective form of resistance against totalitarian violence, just as it effectively protected the independence of the protagonist of *My Argument with the Gestapo*, defending his authentic existence from being imprisoned in the stereotypic role imposed upon him by society. In all probability Merton saw a variation of such a sophisticated game in Ketman, an attitude that was individualistic through and through, while paradoxically disregarding the irony with which Milosz described this essentially pathetic social phenomenon of adjustment – self-realization despite oneself, at the end of the Ketman chapter contrasting it with the heroic attitude that gives up the masks, and is doomed to fail. Merton, despite his full realization that the worst way out is to adjust to the conditions dictated by totalitarian society, seemed to forget for a moment the title of the book, while interpreting this game with the regime as a dialectical game with false identity – like a double affirmation which in fact constitutes a negation, while what Ketman was leading to a victory of

¹⁵ *Życie na wyspach*, pp. 209-10.

¹⁶ *Striving Towards Being*, p. 54.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 37.

conformism, was a defence mechanism that ensured survival; independence and inner freedom weren't at stake, they constituted the cost.

Letter to an Innocent Bystander that was enclosed in the second, so to speak, round of correspondence, and later translated by Milosz for *Kultura*, constituted yet another voice in this long-distance conversation, a voice of inner dialogue, may throw some light on Merton's reading of *The Captive Mind*. The situation described there is viewed from the other side of the iron curtain, nevertheless, devoid of realities, it suggests a universal overtone. It deals with the attitude towards an omnipotent tyranny whose other form was described by Milosz. Characteristically, in this essay the enemy – "they", has no face, one only knows that they change masks, disguises, labels. They do not need to have the police force at their disposal, either, it is sufficient that they exert any kind of force in order to make an individual subordinate, in effect imposing an alien, own element on their existence. The existence of the cornered intellectualist is as unspecified as this threat – he is in the state of vague annoyance, distraction, which Merton in point of fact justifies. The tragic lot sets one free of the vague feeling of guilt caused by one's own innocence, failure to get involved or react; as Merton concludes, "whether we act or not, we are destroyed",¹⁸ thus giving a makeshift solution to the dilemma of contemplation and involvement in current issues that had been tormenting him incessantly. One may even suspect that by their very existence those indefinite enemies help to consolidate this liquid, suspended being, dispersed in a neurotic fog. Here the emptiness of a conformist society seems to enfold everything. Independence becomes the individualist who silently Hamletizes over his response to the tyrant, in his despair there germinates a seed of salvation, if he gives up theories, allows himself to be caught in the stream of life and ceases to mould them into imposed forms. Incidentally, Milosz, who was disappointed with theory in pure form, i.e. Hegliism, must have had difficulties accepting these teachings, albeit useful, because of their vagueness and indefinite style.

Thus *The Captive Mind* might illustrate Merton's conviction that independent individuality suffers always and everywhere, unavoidably trapped between millstones of various tyrannies, harbouring the same criminal intentions to it. In these circumstances any attitude of an individualist who

¹⁸ *Kultura* 1959, no.5, p. 9.

defends his own authentic independence seems to be justified. Characteristically, Merton often put totalitarianism and conformism together, as two aspects of repressive pressure exerted by a community on an individual, the pressure that deprived it of authentic existence, whose ideal was the centre of his anthropology. The individualist from *Letter to an Innocent Bystander* has to set himself against “collective arrogance and despair of own herd”¹⁹ that determines his situation on the supposedly better side of the iron curtain. The terror of conformism, allied with the rule of things, is dehumanising to society. Merton has never come across Witkacy, yet he apparently experienced a similar kind of anxiety, that of individuality being transformed into numbers; he presented Miłosz with an apocalyptic vision of the rule of ruthless managers. He hunted down all totalitarian mechanisms in a democratic society, being of the opinion that “it is not enough to be anti-communist to preserve freedom in America”,²⁰ or, putting it even stronger in a letter: “never was there a place where freedom was so much an illusion”.²¹ In the end this radicalism brought him close to the participants of the youth rebellion of the sixties and during the Vietnam War provoked him to anti-American statements, also expressed in his letters to Miłosz.

Yet at the same time this broad, too broad, understanding of totalitarianism made his reading of *The Captive Mind* so innovative and profound. It revealed a spiritual, not to say metaphysical, dimension of historical circumstances, a universal disinheritance of minds. In fact, it anticipated the author’s interpretation in *The Year of the Hunter*, which connects the book written in early fifties with *The Land of Ulro*, written twenty five years later: “For me it constituted a continuation of *The Captive Mind*, that is a deepening of issues touched upon there”.²² Merton was of the opinion that when the totalitarian borders do not agree with the borders of Nazism and Communism, they reach far beyond the Eastern block and the iron curtain, and “we should all feel near to despair in some sense”.²³ Miłosz himself gave a similar diagnosis of modern civilization in his wartime essays *Contemporary Legends* as well as in his

letters to Andrzejewski, in which he wrote of Europe being destroyed more in the spiritual, than in physical sense. The catastrophe of war was to be a result, not a cause of the so far unnamed spiritual disease. It wasn’t until *The Land of Ulro* that this disease was to be specified more clearly, but it is in his letters to Merton that the issue of a religious imagination crisis emerges for the first time, a disintegration of the vertically-oriented world image, facing towards transcendence, in which the earth was placed between heaven and hell. Miłosz was disappointed with *The Sign of Jonas*:

I waited for some answers to the many theological questions but answers not abstract as in a theological treatise, just on that border between the intellect and our imagination, a border so rarely explored today in religious thinking: we lack an image of the world ordered by religion, while the Middle Ages had such an image [...] a reader (I can judge by introspection only) is eager to learn (gradually) what is the image of the world in Thomas Merton. In a period when the image accepted by majority is clear: empty sky, no pity, stone wasteland, life ended by death.²⁴

In his letter he postulates a new religious literature, that goes beyond the framework of devotional piety, literature which would bring a vision of the world saved by Christ, a vision propagating acceptance of the creation, in a word – here emerges Miłosz’s new poetical agenda, the one which was to be realized in the years to come, and finally leading to *Another Space*, which in turn is heralded by a perspective of the third way, a difficult path between “literature [that] is too subjective” and “theological treatises” that are “too abstract”.²⁵ Miłosz didn’t send this letter, perhaps for exaggerated fear of offending Merton with his comments on the monastic diary, or perhaps he felt a certain want in his expressions, or doubted that his dilemmas would be understood by the Trappist, whose diary carried a proof of deep faith on every single page. At the end he mentioned that he was reading Swedenborg, which proves the thesis that this excerpt from correspondence, together with several others, combine to create idiosyncratic prolegomena of *The Land of Ulro* – they show the kernel of the issues brought up in it, although as yet without stressing the basic antinomy between natural science and religious imagination. It isn’t out of the question that had this

²⁴ Ibidem, pp. 61-62.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 60.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 5.

²⁰ Th. Merton, *Christianity and Totalitarianism*, in: *Disputed Questions*, San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985, p. 148.

²¹ *Striving Towards Being*, p. 74.

²² Cz. Miłosz, *Rok myśliwego* [*The Year of the Hunter*], Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1990, p. 93.

²³ *Striving Towards Being*, p. 52.

letter been posted it would have switched the discussion to a different direction, particularly since Merton, an avid reader of Blake – next to Swedenborg and Oscar Milosz, a leading character in *The Land of Ulro*, might have taken up the mystical theme with enthusiasm. Nevertheless, one should appreciate the importance of unsent letters, which must have influenced their author, because they formed new questions, opened up new directions for his reflection.

In the letter Milosz did send, he accused Merton of a matter not less crucial, referring to questions about the phenomenon of evil that was obsessively tormenting him: “you do not pay much attention to torture and suffering in Nature”.²⁶ For the Polish poet nature has always been a fascinating and yet fearsome theatre of terror. Hence totalitarianism in his depiction is a projection of nineteenth-century scientism onto twentieth century history, an application of strict laws of biological necessity in the historical dealings of man. This view is clearly presented already in the poem he wrote in 1944, after the Warsaw Uprising – *Przyrodzie – pogróżka*.²⁷

Not surprisingly, he questioned the idyllic quality of the nature descriptions in *The Sign of Jonas*, suspecting its author of escapist tendencies, searching for asylum away from society, in the much-idealized nature, while overlooking its murderous aspect. Yet Merton didn't deny that he was “in complete and deep complicity with nature, or imagine I am: that nature and I are very good friends, and console one another for the stupidity and the infamy of the human race and its civilization”.²⁸ In the sixties this basically lyrical approach to nature, overlooking its hard laws, brought him close to the generation of young rebels, hippies, who idealized life in the open, away from civilization, in utopian communities.

Despite their search for common concerns, already in the first year of correspondence there surfaces a protocol of divergence, never fully articulated by either party. Next to their attitude to nature one should mention their different views on human nature. Merton, so readily using the metaphor of depth, was convinced that dormant in every man there is a core of goodness. Milosz on the other hand lectured him on his deep conviction that in everyone there is a seed of evil. His contacts with Milosz happened

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 64.

²⁷ Cf. Cz. Milosz, *Wiersze*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1985. vol. 1, p. 221.

²⁸ *Striving Towards Being*, p. 69.

at the time when he, like Mickiewicz going through incessant break-through, was striving to free his historical vision of Hegelian unalterable laws of development. In fact it was only reading Simone Weil that let him cut this knot of necessity, formed by nature interwoven with human history, by means of Manichean answer. Milosz was fascinated with a dualistic view of the world, while Merton – with mysterious unity and fullness of creation.

Their attitude to Russia should be counted as yet another fundamental difference. Milosz didn't share Merton's Russian fascinations, perhaps with the exception of Dostoyevsky. He certainly didn't share Merton's enthusiasm for Bierdayev, whom he maliciously criticized in a poem *Na pewną książkę* from the war-time series *Głosy biednych ludzi*;²⁹ and in his second letter to Merton, while taking up the subject of Russia and the Russian, he mentioned his lack of confidence in this philosopher and his escape into a pseudo-mystical haze. Merton didn't elaborate on this issue, yet when Milosz gave away his distrust to Boris Pasternak, he replied by sending him his essay on the author of *Doctor Zhivago*. Milosz described the booklet including *The Pasternak Affair* as “convincing”.³⁰ All the reserve expressed in this comment was only to be revealed in the English dissertation published in 1963 *A Sober Look at Pasternak*, whose title is in fact a reply to Merton's apologetic tone. While in the famous novel Merton saw primarily the defence of individualism, Milosz exposed the weaknesses of this vision of the Russian revolution, bared its inconsequence and paradoxes, and accused it of allying with nature against the human universe of history.

Nevertheless, this dialogue is being limited by both parties. As Milosz himself admitted, he interprets Merton's meditation about Prometheus too narrowly, overlooking the profound, unique Simone Weil-like reading of the myth, which gave it an existential depth. His aversion to psychoanalysis and psychologising, to mulling over the problems of self, caused him to consider himself closer to the traditional reading, with which Merton is arguing in *A Note: Two Faces of Prometheus*, presenting a “progressive” interpretation, according to which the titan is a symbol of technological genius and the cosmic aspirations of man, perhaps additionally complicated by the promethean features of Mickiewicz's Konrad, the poet of *The Great Improvisation* seized with pride. However, he tried to assimilate Merton's

²⁹ Cf. *Wiersze*, vol. 1, p. 191.

³⁰ *Striving Towards Being*, p. 65.

meditation through Manicheism: "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?"³¹ They were united by another figure from *The Behavior of Titans*, that of Heraclitus. Significantly, Milosz, himself the author of an essay on Heraclitus included in *Kontynenty*, discovered Merton's essay "with astonishment".³² Both texts were partly made up of fragments.

In the sixties the ways of the two friends began to part. When Milosz found stabilization in the States, Merton was feeling uncertain – "culturally, intellectually and politically".³³ He didn't find what he was looking for in his friend, namely understanding for his political involvement against the nuclear bomb, the Vietnam War, for the human rights movement and revolutionary forces in South America, he was agitated by racial and social issues, which called for obvious ethical choices. Milosz saw them in the perspective of global politics, *cui bono*, and this is why in *Ogród nauk* he accused Merton's frantic activity of lacking historical imagination and demonstrating political naivety.

In fact it was Merton who stressed their bond more often: "our problems are very alike, in the professional and intellectual field at any rate",³⁴ "we are in many respects very much alike",³⁵ "to you I can talk, and begin to say what I want to say".³⁶ This kinship was later revealed in subsequent writings of Milosz – such books as *The Land of Ulro*, *Hymn to the Pearl* and finally *Druga przestrzeń*.

³¹ Ibidem, p. 51.

³² Ibidem, p. 100.

³³ Ibidem, p. 42.

³⁴ Ibidem, p. 99.

³⁵ Ibidem, p. 108.

³⁶ Ibidem, p. 127.