

The Polish intelligentsia and modernity: the search for new moral sources

KRZYSZTOF STALA (*University of Copenhagen, Denmark*)

AT THE BEGINNING of this new century, in the changing political and social world, the Polish intelligentsia is being confronted with challenges quite different from those of the communist era. Its traditional role —as defender of a victimized nation—has to be reconsidered and redefined. The debates of the past decade have shown the urgent need for new directions in the paradigm for the Polish intelligentsia, some new 'moral sources' that go beyond the old inherited dichotomies such as idealism vs realism or Romanticism vs Positivism.

To my generation, born in the 1950s, Witold Gombrowicz and Czesław Miłosz were more than just two great names from the pantheon of modern Polish literature. They defined the horizon of our moral stances. In finding our own identity, in forming an intellectual space for discussion, in articulating resistance to enslavement and violence, we thought in terms of Gombrowicz or Miłosz. Was it possible to think in terms of these two writers without risking schizophrenia, without being trapped in contradictions? Can we talk of schools of Gombrowicz and Miłosz in the mentality of the Polish intelligentsia in the late twentieth century? Do these two names constitute some kind of paradigm for the future in view of the new challenges facing Poles on the threshold of the new century? My paper will attempt to answer these questions.

First, however, I would like to sketch a map of the problems relating to the role of intellectual elites. The situation of the Polish intelligentsia is the topic of many political and intellectual debates dealing with our modern-postmodern era. After 1989, there was a certain crisis in the intelligentsia's role in public life and society as the identity and dominating position of the group was called into question. The new political situation with its normalization of political life caused, on the one hand, the absorption of many groups of the intelligentsia into professional politics, and, on the other, the gradual disappearance of the demand for the so-called 'intelligentsia values' inherited from nineteenth-century tradition such as: dedication to the national and public cause; defense of cul-

tural goods under threat of enslavement (occupation, totalitarianism, or simple stupidity); symbolic and spiritual leadership of the nation in times of threat. For some debaters, the role of the intelligentsia ended irrevocably with the appearance of the Third Republic. They considered that its functions should now be taken over by groups of experts, professional politicians, enlightened entrepreneurs, educators and journalists, in order to normalize its status and adapt it to the rest of Europe.

In a discussion some years ago about the life or death of the Polish intelligentsia in a free Poland, the lineage and ethos of that social group were recalled. Regardless of the different predictions and diagnoses, which were often controversial and mutually exclusive, everyone agreed on the intelligentsia's genesis and dominating values. The origins of the intelligentsia in the nobility, the circumstances of the group's emergence at the end of the nineteenth century as a result of a lack of possibilities to realize a leading role in politics and society, its elite character, its attachment to spiritual and literary values, its infection by Romanticism—all this was more or less indisputable. At the same time, catalogs of the values of the intelligentsia ethos were formulated:

The intelligentsia exists mainly through its ideas, through the values that meet with its collective approval and, as it were, concentrate it around them ... Various values that were taken from different systems and that were rarely unambiguously and precisely defined ... Among these, we find a universal, humanistic morality, the great freedom myth of the Enlightenment, convictions relating to this or that social utopia, to this or that patriotic, territorial, social tradition or tradition of ideas, signs of a cult of science, education and progress, sublimely abstract philosophical principles and the simplest rules of interpersonal relationships, reminders us in everyday language not to be mean, selfish or primitively crude.¹

¹ 'Inteligencja istnieje przede wszystkim przez swe idee, przez wartości, które budzą jej zbiorowe uznanie i które ją niejako skupiają. ... Wartości różnych, zaczerpniętych z rozmaitych systemów, rzadko sformułowanych jednoznacznie i precyzyjnie ... Znajdą się wśród nich treści moralności uniwersalnej, humanistycznej, wielki oświeceniowy mit wolności, przekonania odnoszące się do takiej czy innej utopii społecznej, takiej czy innej tradycji patriotycznej, terytorialnej, socjalnej czy ideowej, przejawy kultu nauki, oświaty i postępu, wzniosłe abstrakcyjne zasady filozoficzne i najprostsze reguły stosunków międzyludzkich, codziennym językiem napominające, żeby nie być świnią, egoistą czy prymitywnym chamem.' (Bohdan Cywiński, 2000, *Inteligencji nekrologi przedwczesne* ('Premature obituaries of the intelligentsia'), *Rzeczpospolita*, 12 April 2000; this debate took place in *Rzeczpospolita*, starting in April 2000.)

Note the manifold character of this package of values—Enlightenment and Romanticism, religiosity and science, tradition and progress coexist in this paradigm, ideas stemming from contradictory sources behave like the lion and the lamb of the Apocalypse ... total consensus, no conflict, pure conciliation.

On another level differing positions existed. Questions were asked as to whether the paradigm of the Polish intelligentsia (the ethics of service and dedication), which proved itself in times of slavery and threat, could function and be useful to the nation in times of freedom and democracy; as to whether the inherent dislike of (even contempt for) bourgeois and pragmatic values, of the *homo oeconomicus* and the rule of law, did not sentence it to the museum shelf?

Notwithstanding that the answers were diverse, the dominating standpoint was introduced in the very first, somewhat provocative article by Bohdan Cywiński under the significant title 'Premature obituaries of the intelligentsia'. It was too early yet, said Cywiński and others (Najder, Bratkowski), to declare the death of the intelligentsia. Perhaps its function should be somewhat modified, adapted to the new situation, but its central identity need not and should not be undermined. It was argued that the threats were still there, not from totalitarian ideology or political slavery, but from the disintegration from within of the *Gemeinschaft*, the replacement of civic society by consumers and businessmen, and the dissolution of the value of high culture and its hierarchy in the chatter of the media.

The suggestions for reforming the role of the intelligentsia were not very far removed from the paradigmatic traditional pattern. First and foremost, the intelligentsia was, in its new situation, to become the guardian of collective values, and to suggest collective, 'communitarianist' solutions rather than individual ones. The atom-ization of interpersonal relations, the privatization of ideas and values and the focus on individual freedom and entrepreneurship would not automatically produce new goals or create new horizons of meaning. To humanize market reform, to regain power over national and cultural symbols, to preserve the role of an authority in the processes of social education—these were the new, collective challenges for the intellectual elites in the new Poland. The middle class, it was argued, was not equipped for these tasks; in the process of building its own and the nation's economic potential, infected

with the myth of the market, it was focused on itself, and although the egoism of its values and goals was understandable, it was not acceptable.

If the discussion of the intelligentsia in the year 2000 more or less underscored the unity and homogeneity of the group, then the debate provoked a year later by J. Gross's book on the Polish responsibility for the murder of the Jewish community of the town of Jedwabne clearly revealed its divisions and polarizations.² Gross's disclosure of the inconvenient, forgotten and repressed truth about how the Poles collaborated in exterminating the Jewish population during the Second World War provoked a discussion concerning the entire Polish national mythology, especially the variant based on martyrdom and sacrifice.

Two extremes emerged. Gross and others fiercely attacked the Polish myth of innocence and its accompanying victimization complex. The Poles' dedication and sacrifice in fights for freedom, their own and others', they argued, should not be used to disguise inconvenient, shameful or ominous facts. The truth of Polish anti-Semitism had been pushed into oblivion by the selectivity of a collective memory that did not allow behavior and attitudes incompatible with the paradigm of sacrifice, suffering and moral purity. The disclosure of the truth of Polish collaboration in the crime in Jedwabne led to the memory of other examples of Polish anti-Semitism (the 'szmalcownicy' during the war, the pogroms in Kielce and Cracow immediately after the war, the anti-Semitic sentiments in official, Catholic and university circles in the years 1936-9, the purges of Jews in the Party following March 1968). Being a victim of history was no justification; the defensive mythologies fostered by Poles in times of occupation and enslavement could not constantly serve as a justification or alibi, either for individual displays of amorality, or for collective madness, anachronisms and degeneration. The current situation, that is the existence of a free, independent Poland, should incline to critical and de-mystifying thought. Polish national mythology, claimed Gross, was still waiting for a profound and critical re-evaluation.

Gross's opponents believed that making an affair of the Jedwabne incident was harmful to the self-image of the Polish nation and could lead to the disintegration or at least the weakening of Polish national identity built on ideas of dedication, honor,

² J. Gross, 2000, *Sąsiedzi, Sejny*.

sacrifice, fidelity. They saw yet another conspiracy by the Jewish mafia against the Polish nation (in the more extreme cases), or, at the very least, a needless reawakening of old conflicts. Polish culture was under permanent threat; the time had not yet come for dealing with a painful past.

The most recent debates and discussions about the role and place of the intelligentsia allow us to draw somewhat paradoxical conclusions. Today's post-communist Polish self-image comprises two opposed tendencies and is expressed through two positions hard to reconcile. The first of these could perhaps be called cultural revisionism, with its roots in a self-critical current in the history of the Polish intelligentsia. This position is expressed in the following way:

We are still slaves of stereotypes—others' as well as our own— we have not succeeded in breaking through convenient historical falsifications and lies. These concern our innate innocence and virtue, the continuity of our Polish history, the eternal Polishness of Silesia, Lithuania and Belarus, the superiority of our culture. These myths and stereotypes keep coming back to life and lead us out to the peripheries of European history and modernity. There is still much to be done—the Polish intelligentsia should concentrate with criticism and care on its own tradition, to re-evaluate it and filter it through the demands of modernity.

The second, conservative and traditional position is expressed with the rhetoric of threat and defense:

We are threatened by the progressive disintegration of values, loss of faith in the great narratives—religious, social, humanist, moral, political—we have lost faith in utopias and in any sort of higher and all-encompassing meaning. We live in a shallow world of gadgets and media (simulacra), stripped of higher values. During her decade or so of freedom and half a century of communism, Poland has lost her national, moral and religious identity and is becoming just another European country, faceless and without character. If these processes of disintegration are not checked, our contribution to Europe will amount to little more than forty million consumers.

Let us recall the question posed in the beginning of this paper and ask whether is it possible to point out, in this new process of polarization, some centers of thought that might epitomize the two opposing attitudes of cultural revisionism and traditional conciliation. It would seem that the figures of Witold Gombrowicz and

Czesław Miłosz respectively can, in fact, epitomize, in the scope of this debate, two opposite poles of discourse, two 'complementary moral sources', in the terms of Charles Taylor.³

Witold Gombrowicz — master of the hermeneutics of suspicion

When, in the 1960s, the works of Witold Gombrowicz were about to reach all strata of the reading public in Poland—mainly due to smuggling from the West and to the re-editions of Ferdynand Murawski—it was apparent that we were dealing with a writer of great dignity. Gombrowicz spoke in a fresh, young and new voice that corresponded with our need for renewal and rebirth, a need which we shared with the surrounding world. It was in accordance with the will to rebel that dwelled in the generation of young Poles born after the War. That will to revolt was not directed only against communism and its dictatorship. The world of the Party and its New-speak was distant and abstract: the targets of our rebellion were rather the traditional Polish family with its rigid obligations, the anachronistic education system, the absurdities of the official hybrid-culture that consisted of affected patriotism, elements of artificial folklore, and admiration for socialist progress. Long before Foucault we discovered, together with Gombrowicz, the structures of coercion inherent in the family, in the institutions, in the ideologies, and in culture. It was obviously Gombrowicz, not Karl Marx, who helped us run away from that 'house of serfdom', the coercion of forms. Among those coercive forms were the everyday absurdities of communism that permeated all spheres of life. They were killing all manifestations of freedom, individuality, and self-independence. We have, however, learned from Gombrowicz that this form of oppression is not the only one, that coercion can have many faces.

Gombrowicz demystifies culture as such, morality, and the world of ideas. All admiration and dedication is coerced by pressure coming from outside, from the community: from your neighbors or your Nation, from teachers and literary critics. The Others are always there.

The radical suspicion of all forms of coercion is expressed by Gombrowicz on behalf of the strong independent self and its ultimate freedom. Moral sources are inherent in my-self, in my need for

³ C. Taylor, 1989, *Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge.

free expression, in my desire for alterity, for being different. These values can be found neither in the external world, itself being an epistemic construction of my mind, nor in religion, nor in God, nor in ideologies. Tensions, pregnant with consequences, arise between my-self and other human beings; moral values emerge in conflicts, in agony. Such is the meaning of the metaphor of the inter-human church, acting as an affirmative stance, that appears in Gombrowicz's drama *The Wedding* (*Ślub*), or in his *Diary* (*Dziennik*). The Others do not appear here on the horizon of Christian love—*agape*, nor on the horizon of Rousseau-inspired sympathy or compassion. In spite of some references to Buber, Gombrowicz's anthropology is by no means grounded in the idea of dialog, or in an epiphany of encounter (as for instance in Lévinas). It is rather a constant *psy-chomachia*, a permanent agony between fighting selves.

I have already referred to Gombrowicz's critical attitude towards all mythologies, especially those with a nationalist provenance. For all the iconoclasts, demystifiers and deconstructors who deal with Polish culture Gombrowicz's attitude may serve as the ultimate departure-point. His hermeneutics of suspicion, his criticism towards Polish national myths, especially those with Romantic roots, may serve as the proper ground, or moral source, for those intellectuals who try to fight the traditional, the mentality of the Pole—the Catholic (Ciemnogród) with his blind attachment to all things Polish, with his mythologies of victimization.

In his novel *Trans-Atlantyk* Gombrowicz introduces the neologism 'synczyna' ('fillia', 'sonland'). The term renders Gombrowicz's radical intellectual heritage: it glorifies the community of young sons —rebels rising against the Patria of the fathers, against the coercive tradition. The cultural patricide suggested by Gombrowicz can be understood in a 'cruel' way— as a radical break with the national heritage (to escape, run away, retreat—the favorite motifs of Gombrowicz's novels). One can, however, grasp the cultural patricide in a softer manner—as an unrestrained relation to all forms, even those connected to patriotism. Let us play with all forms, even with the national sacredness, argues Gombrowicz in a somewhat post-modern way. Polishness should not be comprehended as a burden—rather, it should act as a creative opportunity, as a pivotal power for individual maturation.

The hermeneutics of confidence and trust: Czesław Miłosz

On first sight Czesław Miłosz's approach appears quite antithetical to that of Gombrowicz. If for Gombrowicz too much meaning exists in the world (less meaning—more my-self), Miłosz depicts a world that keeps losing its meaning and order (another name for a disenchanted world) and attempts to struggle with that loss. His weapon is the poetry of confidence in truth, the poetry of affirmation.

Miłosz's essays and poems consistently unmask the perils of Modernity, above all loss of meaning is seen as its most dangerous outcome. In the broadest perspective Miłosz is deeply immersed in the Romantic stream of ideas with its revolt against the fragmentation of the human experience. In his intellectual summa, *The Land of Ulro (Ziemia Ulro)* from 1974, Miłosz depicts the atmosphere of the waste land marking the modern spiritual landscape of Modernity, and he traces the sources of this fatal condition, recalls those cassandric thinkers who have warned humanity about the traps it is about to fall into. In an interview-book by Ewa Czarnecka bearing the significant title *The Traveler of the World*, Miłosz declares in a few words his attitude expressed in *The Land of Ulro*:

here one can find my opposition against the world of Western civilization, against the consequences of the scientific Weltanschauung. We live in the late period of the scientific revolution and its outcome. It can take the form of permissive society; find its expression through stressing the rights for individual happiness against society. [... *The Land of Ulro*] tells the story of those few who tried to find a way out of that vicious circle. They dreamed about a completely new direction... Maybe we entered the wrong train of history? ... Maybe some other options existed? People like Blake, Swedenborg, Mickiewicz, Oskar Miłosz, Goethe ... had looked for another configuration, another possibility.⁴

⁴ tu jest ciągle moja opozycja wobec świata cywilizacji zachodniej, która jest wynikiem naukowego bądź co bądź *Weltanschauung* Jesteśmy w późnej fazie rozwoju światopoglądu naukowego i wpływu tego światopoglądu aż do konsekwencji *permissive society*, w podkreślaniu prawa do szczęścia jednostki wbrew społeczeństwu. [... *Ziemia Ulro* jest książką] o tych, którzy za cenę wariactwa szukali wyjścia z sytuacji. To znaczy marzyli o kompletnie nowym torze. ... a może wsiedliśmy do niewłaściwego pociągu? Może było kilka opcji? Tacy ludzie jak Blake, Swedenborg, Mickiewicz, Oskar Miłosz, Goethe ... szukali innego układu, innej możliwości.' (E. Czarnecka, 1983, *Podróżny świata: rozmowy z Czesławem Miłoszem*, New York, 198)

The last 200 years of European history is composed, according to Miłosz, of a continuous disintegration of values, a disintegration of civilization. While the nineteenth century created the myth of rational, humanitarian and constant progress, the twentieth century, with its atrocities, made clear that the monumental myth of progress is empty. The disintegration of values has a number of reasons, and these reasons are to be found inside the project of Enlightenment, in the very heart of the process of modernization. In the dense and digressive text of *Ulro* one can find all the strands of Western critical attitudes towards Modernity, tracks of thought comparable to Max Weber, Anthony Giddens, and Zygmunt Bauman. These critical strands always appear in a very personal context and language, they are by no means abstract.

Miłosz's whole literary production can be read as an attempt to restore that lost integration, to restore the hierarchy of values, the deep sources of meaning. His positive programme can be summed up as follows :

- *The necessity for deeper meaning (for Great narratives, broad horizons of meaning).* The hermeneutics of suspicion should hold back in the face of the notions of Truth, Confidence, Hope, and Love, and respect their holiness and inevitability. The mythologization of the world, performed in different religions, renewed in and by poetry, is also a fundamental human need. It helps us bear all the discomforts of human life with hope and dignity.
- *Confidence in stability and objectivity of the World.* All modern theories that proclaim relativism concerning our world-image and undermine our confidence in objective reality *an sich* act against us. Miłosz's poetry proclaims an affirmative attitude towards reality, an acceptance of the world as it is. To behold and depict the beauty of the world, to restore the hymnal approach to it—that is Miłosz's poetic credo.
- *The necessity of order and hierarchy.* There do exist some universal principles of value in culture and ethics which can distinguish good from evil, high from low. All attempts to deconstruct hierarchies have their own latent hierarchies, their own 'constitutive goods'; total anarchy is not only dangerous—it is unattainable.
- *Human nature is not a chimera-construction, it really exists.* For Miłosz, in spite of the cruel experiences of the twentieth century that unmasked the weakness and mutability of human nature, there is an unchangeable core in human beings, a human substance, *esse*.

• *The stable and objective reality must have its external and omniscient narrator* (in other words, there is some ordering instance in the world). The world is endowed with deep meaning, has a second bottom, or in Miłosz's words, an undergrowth, a lining. Some men, especially poets, are endowed with the gift of being able to see that bottom. They are capable of attaining, of revealing the enigma of faith. Miłosz's metaphysics is challenging and difficult and sometimes in conflict with traditional Polish religiosity. The *Theological Treatise (Traktat teologiczny)*, a short essay in verse, published by Miłosz in 2001, is a record of those tensions and doubts that dwell in the metaphysical attitude on the eve of the twenty-first century, but Miłosz evidently takes side here—in favor of reflexive religiosity and faith.

In his review of twentieth-century philosophical attitudes towards moral 'constitutive goods', Charles Taylor discerns an affirmative current.⁵ After all the disillusionments about progress, Christianity, and the innocence of nature there are still some thinkers who try to find moral sources outside the discrete, subjective self, in the external, transcendent sphere. This modernist epiphany, represented and epitomized by such writers as Tomas Mann, Franz Kafka, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, may perfectly well act as a horizon for Miłosz's affirmative approach. It expresses the attitude of a modernist who fights against the discourse of instrumental reason, in search of sources which can restore depth, richness and meaning to life.

As I have already demonstrated in the first part of my paper, there is in contemporary Poland a need for two kinds of intelligentsia-discourse: for a hermeneutics of suspicion and for a discourse of affirmation. These two attitudes are in conflict, they unmask a deep polarization and deconstruct the intelligentsia's own myth of unity.

It is possible to observe some regularity in Polish intellectual history. In times of peril, ideological differences disappeared, softened, and the intelligentsia paradigm remained a broad ideological construction. Without risk of conflict, it could embrace Christian values, the idea of progress and social justice, the soft forms of nationalism and critical thought. J. Jedlicki has observed that the first split of this unity can be traced to the end of the nineteenth cen-

⁵ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, chapter on epiphany.

ture, when the modern ideologies—socialism, nationalism, Piłsud-skism—emerged from the labyrinth of heterogeneous values and came into conflict with each other.

Later, for example after the gaining of independence (1920s), during the Second World War, in the Solidarity era, ideological tensions lost their significance, and a conciliatory approach was dominant. Differences were effaced in the name of the unity of the nation. After 1989, there began a new process of fraction starting with the famous 'war on the top', promoted by Wałęsa in the early 1990s. In recent years, especially during the Jedwabne debate, this trend has grown stronger.

It is time now to recall the question I posed in the beginning of this paper. Do the figures of Miłosz and Gombrowicz fit the roles of 'the new prophets' for the Polish intelligentsia? Are they able to act as 'moral sources', to deliver coherent visions of values to match the challenges of the twenty-first century?

It seems that there is good reason to give positive answers to these questions. Both Miłosz and Gombrowicz are deeply rooted in the Polish tradition, but on the other hand the experience of emigration has taught them to keep a distance to their Polish identity, and made them receptive to the challenges of modernity. Both are aware of the broken horizons of modernity, and both see the Polish problems in the context of the rapid changes taking place in the modern world. For both, this wide perspective has called for an impartial, nonpolitical attitude.

Both Miłosz and Gombrowicz may play the role of focal points for the reception of western modern thought, of a window onto Europe and the world. With Gombrowicz as guide it is easier to understand the whole stream of the hermeneutics of suspicion; it is easier to grasp the consequences of the 'constructivist' attitude in cultural studies, especially in the field of the modern approach to nationalism. The discourses of feminism, deconstruction, and post-modernism suddenly become more familiar after reading Gombrowicz's *Diary*.

With Miłosz in hand, the modern hermeneuticists (Ricoeur, Gadamer) and the ideas of communitarians (Taylor, McIntyre) sound more familiar, the search for new alternative sources of sacrum in modern culture (epitomized by Jung, Eliade, Frankl) seems justified and right.

And this is not the end of the list. With the help of, or through, Gombrowicz one can read the whole tradition of Polish critical 'iconoclasts'—from Maurycy Mochnacki, Cyprian Kamil Norwid, and Stanisław Brzozowski to Leszek Kołakowski and Sławomir Mrożek. Miłosz, on the other hand, may act as the spiritual leader for all those who intend to renew the Polish metaphysical tradition, in its non-dogmatic, open form. Miłosz opens the way to the heritage of Juliusz Słowacki and Adam Mickiewicz, to Zdzisław Chłosta and Józef Tischner...

I would like to end my paper with a provocative statement. Bringing Gombrowicz's deconstructivist thinking to its radical conclusions may generate a question: what if the core of Polish culture is infected and corrupted to the bone? Is it possible to re-orient a whole culture, or to abandon its crucial symbolic universe in the name of modernity and rationality, effectiveness and tolerance? What about the effects of such an operation on Polish national identity and cultural reproduction? Is it capable of surviving?

With Miłosz we can pose another radical question: what if the modern world is infected and corrupted to the bone? Is a return to the symbolic values of the past the only solution? What about the perils of backwardness and provincialism, of populist manipulations with ancient symbols, of fundamentalism?

Is there any middle course?