Orientalizing Communism: The Shifting Boundaries of Europe in Brodsky and Milosz

This essay is part of a larger project that investigates the effect of guiding political narratives on political decisions in formerly communist Eastern European countries, especially the narratives that helped to discredit communist politics and economy in favor of liberal-democratic capitalism. Not only is the term “Eastern Europe” charged with connotations of “otherness” in relation to another guiding fiction, “the free world,” but many Eastern European cultural and political identities have historically been shaped in reaction to this stigma. My project is theoretically inspired by postcolonial writing on “Orientalist” discourses, specifically by the extension of Edward Said’s concept by Larry Wolff, Maria Todorova, Milica Bakic-Hayden and others to the discussion of Western political and cultural attitudes toward Eastern Europe. I am interested in the little discussed Orientalization of Eastern European communist regimes during the Cold War, especially in the anti-communist dissident exiles’ contributions to Western attempts to understand, map, or geo-graph the communist “other.” For the purposes of this paper, I examine selected essays by Joseph Brodsky (from Less than One and On Grief and Reason) and Czeslaw Milosz (from To Begin Where I Am, The Native Realm: A Search for Self-Definition, and Visions from San Francisco Bay) to show how their employment of Orientalist stereotypes belies an anxiety to distance themselves from communist politics and to emancipate their homelands from the stigma of cultural backwardness.

Critical scholarship has largely focused on these authors' poetic output – where the “real,” unrestrained artistic innovation worthy of literary critical attention allegedly surfaces – somewhat neglecting, in turn, the vast and diverse body of their essays, lectures, and open letters, which have nevertheless served as an important context for interpreting (and prompting interest in) their poetry. I would like to suggest that such neglect may be caused by a traditional
categorization of this type of writing as itself critical and philosophical – rather than poetic or fictional – and that the fictional quality of Milosz’s and Brodsky’s prose is further obfuscated by its autobiographic dimension that claims it, however precariously, for “truth.”

Of course, this is a problematic dichotomy, which I set out to challenge by critically dissecting the textuality of Brodsky’s and Milosz’s “lived experience.” I treat the authors’ autobiographical writing as, in effect, the “writing” of Brodsky and Milosz, without assigning primacy, chronological or otherwise, to “life under communism” which is to be observed from a distance and represented objectively (mimetically, or even metaphorically). This is not to argue that “lived experience” did not take place, or that it does not matter where or how Milosz or Brodsky grew up, but that its narrative articulation is ideologically loaded and hardly occurs in a political and cultural vacuum. This ideological dimension, the narrative non-transparency, arises at the intersection between the intended audience, since much of this prose was intended primarily for Western consumption (or consumption by anti-communist, democratic-minded reformists at home), the authority accorded the philosophical insights by the power of “direct” engagement with communist politics, and the authority of victimization. In this respect, it becomes almost obscene to treat the autobiographical/philosophical essays by Brodsky or Milosz as anything other than articulations of exilic “truth,” the unmasking of the evils of Soviet/communist politics, or, following the authors’ own pleas to be treated apolitically, theorizations of exile as a metaphysical, ubiquitous creative category.

Exemplary in this case is David Bethea’s study of Joseph Brodsky, which argues that Roland Barthes’ and Michel Foucault’s theories about the “death of the author” do not apply in the case of Eastern European writers victimized by communism. Bethea proceeds to resurrect the “real” author and his/her biography behind the writing, and insists on reading Brodsky’s essays
as exilic/dissident renderings of a particular biographical context. Despite such a nuanced
definition, this approach nevertheless falls into the trap of assigning primacy to “biography,”
which, because it is so primarily “tragic,” inspires a critical blindness in Bethea to the ideological
discourses in which Brodsky’s autobiographical narrativization participates. Thus, “East” and
“West” are treated as unproblematic categories (since Brodsky is a victim of “Eastern”
authoritarianism and a subscriber to a cosmopolitan, i.e. “Western” identity), Brodsky’s praise of
Western literary traditions is seen as a tool of resistance to the Eastern cultural “Stone Age,” and
much attention is devoted to Brodsky’s identification of “essential” differences between the
“anglophone and russophone traditions” (211, 40, 227).

I read Brodsky and Milosz against this ideological blindness, which, along with the
“author,” resurrects other accoutrements of classical humanist politics and literary criticism, such
as the notion of a “subject” who is more or less autonomous, original, logical, centered, and
above all an individual emancipating him/herself by being able to narrate his/her plight to a
sympathetic audience. If we read Brodsky and Milosz in this way, we always-already treat them
as emancipated, “Western,” subjects leaving their misguided (and silent) “Eastern” brethren
behind, and thus perpetuate the conditions for discrimination, the conditions that make the
Orientalist discourse under discussion possible. Instead, I highlight the problematic of treating
the essayistic writing by Milosz and Brodsky, which has largely helped them achieve and
maintain public visibility in exile, as mimetic, objective representations of the lands behind the
Iron Curtain.

Brodsky’s and Milosz’s authoritative autobiographic positions can be said to follow in
the logic of “onto-typo-logy,” a concept forwarded by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe in Typography:
Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics. Although their plight is “different” from anything experienced in
the “Western” world – to which this “difference” must offer its testimony – Brodsky’s and
Milosz’s writing and frequently their critical reception nevertheless aspire toward presenting
them as what Lacoue-Labarthe calls a “type,” a transcendental “form, figure, imprint, type of a
*humanity*” (52). For instance, Milosz has been famously called a “witness” of history, and even
presented himself as a prophetic bearer of “secret knowledge,” of “hidden truths,” and Brodsky
has never quite been able to shake off the designation of a “persecuted poet.” In becoming such
transcendental figures, they impart insights that both Easterners and Westerners can presumably
identify with, affirming their common human lot: Easterners can already “recognize” the tropes
employed to describe (represent) communism, whereas Westerners receive a warning about what
communism might do to their own lives and societies (while observing and judging from a safe
distance the supposedly common human experiences). I want to relate this establishment of the
author – the humanist subject – as a transcendental figure to whom “belongs the role of giving
meaning,” the “bestowal of meaning” to the world, to the Cartesian subject who “surveys” and
“sees” the world, and through whose perspective the world is mapped, geo-graphed, and divided
into understandable parts (Lacoue-Labarthe 55). In this roundabout way, I seek to relate the
“typography” and “topography” in Brodsky’s and Milosz’s writing, as their narration of the
“self” is frequently inseparable from the narration of European (and global) geography and from
the delineation of Easternness and Westernness, which colors their discussions of relevant
East/West histories.

In this respect, the authors perform what Gearoid Ó Tuathail calls a depoliticization of the
geographic discourse, where geography is seen as a “permanent, self-evident realm of
necessity… independent of our beliefs and attitudes about it,” in other words, as part of “Nature”
(51). Brodsky’s and Milosz’s obsessive mapping and geo-graphing of Eastern/Central/
Western/Europe does not occur in a cultural and political vacuum, but rather participates in Orientalist traditions which construct Byzantium or the Ottoman Empire as more “Eastern” than Russia, Russia as more “Eastern” than Poland, or Poland as more “Eastern” than France. These shifting, unstable boundaries in Brodsky’s and Milosz’s essays themselves highlight the constructed nature of such delineations, depending as they do on the authors’ imagined geographic positions or national affiliations: Brodsky in Russia, and Milosz in Poland/Lithuania. In this respect, Bakic-Hayden’s insights about the “the gradation of ‘Orients,’” the “nesting Orientalisms” and shifting hierarchies of Easternness and Westerness in the constructions of Balkan identities can be extended to the construction of European hierarchies in Brodsky and Milosz (918).

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In Brodsky’s essays, the history of Russia, essentialized as a tradition of despotic rule that reaches its peak with communism, becomes expressed in geographic terms: as a fault of Russia’s proximity to Byzantium, and later, to Ottoman Turkey (or implicitly, Asia). If geography, as o Tuathail argues, is “naturalized – it simply ‘is’” then the history of Russia becomes a narrative of inevitable causality, of endless repetition of the same, in short, of immutability (50). Historical immutability as ascribed to the East – in contrast to which only the West progresses, from royal despotism into democracy and human rights – is of course one of the pillars of Orientalist narratives that constructed Asia as ahistorical. Brodsky places blame primarily on this “Asiatic” corruption of Russia which, by virtue of being somewhat close to Europe, has had potential for becoming Enlightened (Westernized). However, because of its Eastern neighbors, it could never fully realize its potential because it would always be dragged “backwards.” The most striking exposition of this argument emerges in his essay “Flight from
Byzantium,” where Brodsky’s visit to Istanbul prompts an examination of history: “There are places where history is inescapable, like a highway accident – places where geography provokes history. Such is Istanbul, alias Constantinople, alias Byzantium” (406-07). The enumeration of the different names of the same city, invoking its changing yet identical masters and regimes, suggests a continuity in the Byzantine and Ottoman regimes, portrayed as Oriental and autocratic, with no history of the separation of church and state, of humanism or democracy.

In Brodsky’s imaginary, Byzantine emperor Constantine adopted Christianity and aspired toward building a “Second Rome” in the East, but this would ultimately sever ties with Western development: here Christianity was “fated to become Orientalized” as, for the Second Rome, “Persia…was far more real than Hellas, if only in a military sense” (413-14). Brodsky employs images of geographic contamination as Byzantium fails to benefit from either the Roman legal traditions or Greek traditions of democracy, assumed to be out of reach. Byzantium’s alleged tradition of the non-separation of church and state is merely continued by the Ottomans, who, because they are not “even” Christian, are predictably more brutal in degree: “the anti-individualism of Islam would find the soil of Byzantium so welcoming that by the ninth century Christianity would be more than ready to flee to the north” (416). Ottomans continue Eastern traditions of “obedience, of hierarchy, of profit, of trade, of adaptability: a tradition, that is, drastically alien to the principles of moral absolute” (417).

By virtue of being from this part of the world or at least from its neighborhood, Brodsky here speaks as one – Lacoue-Labarthe’s type – who knows its tradition of obedience and despotism intimately, and who is accorded authority, and authenticity, through “lived experience.” Yet his position is that of an emancipated Western subject who can recognize the “lack” of democracy and human rights, which are endowed with an implicit positive
valorization. From his imagined position in Russia Brodsky can still “survey” the Orient as a “European,” but one who has the advantage of knowing the Oriental neighbors: “born by the Baltic, in the place regarded as a window on Europe, I always felt something like a vested interest in this window on Asia with which we shared a meridian. On grounds perhaps less than sufficient, we regarded ourselves as Europeans” (440). Brodsky’s distancing from the “East” parallels his desire to eventually distance himself from Soviet Russia as well, which inevitably continues the pattern set by Byzantium and Ottoman Turkey. Thus, the Soviet takeover is not seen as a singular event, or product of a particular historical moment, but rather as a historical inevitability: “the star and the crescent of Islam” are combined as Brodsky wonders, “And that hammer, isn’t it a modified cross?” (429).

In Brodsky’s portrayals of Russia’s “rape” and victimization by Byzantium’s Orientalized Christianity and the Ottoman anti-individualist tradition, Russia is feminized and passively innocent, but once it develops its own imperialist pretensions – especially with the onset of Soviets – it acquires aggressive, conquering, and masculine attributes. Brodsky effectively combines Christian Europe’s racist fears of Asian hordes and Muslim fanatics, and its fears of communist barbarians: “Isn’t my native realm an Ottoman Empire now – in extent, in military might, in its threat to the Western world? Aren’t we now by the walls of Vienna? And is not its threat the greater in that it proceeds from the Easternized…Christianity?” (438). Declaring that Western Christianity has doomed the East to non-existence by divorcing Byzantium, Brodsky implies that it also committed the mistake of future disinterest, of not knowing the Eastern enemy. Brodsky’s essays aim to arouse interest in the communist East among Westerners, to make it visible and knowable, but his analysis of Soviet politics shrouds it in “irrational” mystique rather than making it comprehensible to a Western reader. Since the East
has always shunned “moral absolutes,” the Soviet regime predictably provides the West with an example of “human evil” which Brodsky conceives as a metaphysical category. This evil simply cannot be explained in Western terms: it transcends Western ideas of law, medicine, or “norms of human behavior” used to deal with criminal offense (423). Whether we speak of “the Iranian Imam’s butchering tens of thousands of his subjects” or about Stalin’s “maxim, uttered in the course of the Great Terror, that ‘with us, no one is irreplaceable’” the negative human potential of the East escapes “rational” explanation: it is inscrutable (422).

For Brodsky, communists are “creatures who by all human accounts should be considered degenerates,” ruling in the “most unjust country in the world” (“Less than One” 32). The October revolution is but a criminal, unjustifiable coup d’état, and the storming of the Winter Palace merely a chance for ruthless Red Guards to “rape half the female unit guarding the palace” (87-88). The communist regime, in Brodsky, becomes a continuation of the czarist regime whose motto was “Russia must rule shamelessly” (“Flight” 438). But czars are amateurs compared to Lenin and successors, and striking here is Brodsky’s preference for Peter the Great over Lenin, discussed in his essay “A Guide to a Renamed City.” Although the czar’s project of building a city on the Neva was “ill-conceived” and met with “formidable opposition,” Brodsky still respects him for overcoming Russia’s traditional inferiority complex by bravely approaching Europe through St. Petersburg (71). Conversely, Lenin resorts to Moscow, the Russian interior, out of fear of Europe; the country again retreats “to its womblike, claustrophobic, and xenophobic condition” (82). While Lenin’s regime is associated with imperialist, masculine, and aggressive characteristics, Brodsky also portrays it as insecure, introverted, and effeminate – in short, castrated – divesting it even of the power to intimidate. The regime appears more ridiculous than terrifying, incapable of even facing the world that it supposedly aims to conquer.
Although Russia’s history is” immutable,” its proximity to the West is imagined as providing potential for some, albeit insufficient, infiltration of democratic ideas, especially in St. Petersburg, a geographically and culturally liminal city par excellence. “Silver Age” Petersburg, with its tragically transient longing for world “civilization,” looks “just like” any other Western city, with its Nelson-type pillars and American-type political democratic culture. Brodsky obsessively returns to this theme, arguing in “Catastrophies in the Air” that “the turn of the century” in Russia was an unusual period indeed because “technological and scientific breakthroughs…caused a qualitative leap in the masses’ self-awareness” (285). Again, Brodsky notes, there were “more political parties than in today’s America or Great Britain,” but Russia was also unique in that there was a “great upsurge in philosophical writing and in science fiction with strong utopian or social-engineering overtones” (285). Russia was becoming emancipated, had recognized the “evil” of the czarist regime, and its utopianism was not necessarily a dangerous thing. However, the final articulation of that utopianism in the October revolution was a betrayal of the popular aspirations: communists, Brodsky claims, were false Messiahs.

Brodsky “writes” himself as a Westernized subject who embraces the ideals of democracy – freedom of speech and individualism – as a “line of flight” from the dystopian, collectivist (i.e. anti-individualist) communist ideology. Speaking of growing up in “Leninized” Petersburg, as Nabokov might call it, where he was drawn to Western movies, music, fashions, and literature that were haphazardly distributed or prohibited, Brodsky remarks, “With our instinct for individualism fostered at every instance by our collectivist society, with our hatred toward any form of affiliation, be that with a party, a block association, or, at that time, a family, we were more American than Americans” (“Spoils of War” 14). Even as Soviet Leningrad, the city is under heavy communist censorship but persists in figuring as a window onto the ever
more elusive West: Brodsky says he can “see Europe” through his radio when he catches
European stations (“Spoils” 7). His primary concern is the elusiveness of Western art and
literature that is proscribed by the Soviet regime; in turn, he tries to “prove” to his Western
audiences that Petersburg nevertheless continues its subversive, anti-Soviet – and anti-Eastern –
streak by harboring the circulation of practically inaccessible and unaffordable Western texts.

Brodsky’s fascination with serendipitously encountering a book of poetry by Yeats,
Auden, or T.S. Eliot in effect “triumphantly inaugurates a literature of empire” in Homi
Bhabha’s words, affirming its authority to the extent that it is disseminated and translated
(despite the authorities’ prohibition), exchanged, and read, even in such “political backwaters” as
Soviet Russia (102). Bhabha refers to cultural writings of British colonialism in which the
“fortuitous discovery of the English book” in the “wastes of colonial India, Africa, the
Caribbean” becomes “an insignia of colonial authority and a signifier of colonial desire and
discipline” (102). Brodsky performs a similar gesture of praising the power of a metropolitan
English text set against the Soviet, intellectually uninteresting background. The English book
positively elevates, as Brodsky notes of the poetry anthologies he obtains: “You could pull them
out of your pocket in a streetcar or in a public garden, and even though the text would be only a
half or a third comprehensible, they’d instantly obliterate the local reality” (“To Please a
Shadow” 366). Brodsky is not a metropolitan colonial; yet, he speaks from the place of “colonial
desire,” both in terms of satisfying the narcissistic desires of his projected audiences by affirming
the importance of their cultural heritage, and in terms of expressing his own desire for
recognition of a (non-Soviet) Russia that is conversant with Anglo-American literature.

Not surprisingly, then, he also praises Russian literature that emerged on the cultural
scene of St. Petersburg, whose geography and cosmopolitan spirit allows a number of authors to
look at themselves as if from “outside,” from a Western perspective: Akhmatova, Mandelstam, Tsvetaeva. When this part of Russia participates in European cultural development, Petersburg is no longer Constantinople/Istanbul, but rather Alexandria, an “other” center of civilization, coexistent with Athens. Predictably, Brodsky largely excludes Soviet avant-garde and soc-realist literature from “European culture”: it doesn’t count among civilizational achievements, and mostly retards development. Since Tolstoy, Russian prose “went down the winding, well-trodden path of mimetic writing and … has reached the pits of socialist realism”; even avant-garde writers like Pilnyak, Zamyatin, and Babel are reduced to “outright cynicism, and their works to tantalizing hors d’oeuvres on the empty table of a lean nation” (“Catastrophies” 277). On the assumption that Soviet barbarians could not possibly produce interesting art, Brodsky describes modern Russian literature as a wordless “vacuum,” prophesying, “Russia may exit the twentieth century without leaving great prose behind” (269).

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At this stage I turn to Milosz, whose essays are characterized by a discourse of cultural liminality similar to the one in Brodsky. Milosz’s imagined geographic position shifts westward, to post-World-War-I Wilno, a city mourned as a hapless victim of geography as much as Brodsky’s Petersburg. But although Wilno lies somewhat more to the west than St. Petersburg, and is thus closer to “Europe,” its location does not geo-graph it as unambiguously Western. For Milosz, Wilno is both a civilizational bastion against, and a whipping boy of, the absolute Russian “other” lodged firmly in the unpredictable East. Its cultural liminality emerges in the idea that, while it managed to nurture a tradition of parliamentary democracy worthy of a Western government, it was always-already stunted in its development by Russian imperialist desire, to which it fell victim throughout most of its history except for the brief period between
the World Wars. Significantly, during most of this period Wilno was occupied by Poland, and the rest of Lithuania, like Poland, was independent. However, Polish nationalism and imperialist desire, while vehemently criticized by Milosz, compare favorably to Russian territorial pretensions. Milosz therefore focuses on the Wilno of the interwar period as a paradigm of nationalist antagonisms, and simultaneously, as a space of utopian possibilities for Europe – not unlike Brodsky’s culturally thriving Petersburg of the pre-October-Revolution era – preceding the descent into Nazism or Stalinism.

Milosz’s writing is, on the one hand, a testimony to his Western audiences about the historically Western leanings of Polish culture, and on the other hand, an admission of Polish inability to escape affinities – geographic, linguistic, or political – with the hated Russian neighbor. This double testimony “interpellates” the Polish, to invoke Althusser, as simultaneously the marginalized “others” and as potentially empowered metropolitans. This binary that denotes both a distinction and a cohabitation can be compared to Rey Chow’s reflections on the cultural politics of “ethnicity,” where the “ethnic” is distinctly not the “neutral” Westerner, and yet must “protest” his/her ethnicity as a “captivity narrative,” as “captivity-in-existence” in order to affirm – and supposedly win – the biopolitical rights imagined to be safeguarded by the West (42). Milosz suggests that Poland is held in ethnic captivity, so to speak, because of its geographic affiliation with Russia, implicitly presented in terms of inevitable contagion, of unfavorable cross-breeding. Russian influence on the Polish-Lithuanian Wilno is expressed in almost purely negative terms: “the long Russian dominion” had left only “bad paving, the incredible difficulty citizens had conforming to hygienic regulations,” and a population of Byelorussians, hated by Lithuanians and Poles alike for their “passivity, shiftlessness, and defeatism in the face of destiny” (“City of My Youth” 56-57). Russia,
however, positively embraces the unhealthy political and cultural practices that Milosz identifies in Poland, as all are imagined to be far more extreme “over there.” While Milosz “confesses” to Polish “disorder, an inability to control matter…recklessness, drunkenness,” he says that “in Russia the inability to order one’s immediate surroundings…reached unheard-of proportions,” so that “Poles in Russia, whether voluntary or involuntary émigrés, acted as a civilizing force” (“Russia” 133).

The Polish are credited with a cultural fascination with the West, and a yearning to overthrow Czarist despotism so as to establish democracy, but unfortunately “Poland’s social structure brought her closer to Russia: in both countries capitalism appeared late and cut no durable traces in the psyche” (133). Although Russians and Poles should have been “brothers” in the common struggle against Czarist oppression, their “incompatibility of temper” prevents such a healthy association. While Enlightened Poles saw “revolution as a means of conferring on all citizens the old parliamentary privileges of the Polish gentry,” “Eastern” Russians “wished to destroy, to change the land into a tabula rasa, and then to begin to build anew” (134-35). For Milosz, Poles are at once “Slavic” (ethnic) like Russians, and Western (cosmopolitan, neutral) unlike Russians, which results in a curious love-hate relationship with not only Russia, but with one’s own ethnic and linguistic identity. Because Polish and Russian are linguistic “brothers,” Poles “are able to get an intuition of ‘Russianness’ mainly through the language, which attracts them because it liberates their Slavic half.” But, “the very thing that attracts them is at the same time menacing” (138). Slavic identity becomes an impossible object of love, which must continually be denied through a critical awareness or disidentification. Milosz compares identical phrases in Russian and Polish, and predictably concludes that the first “connotes gloom, darkness, and power,” and second “lightness, clarity, and weakness.” Lest unsuspecting Poles be
Milosz offers this simple practice as an “exercise in self-ridicule and a warning” (138).

Because of this shameful affiliation, Milosz must rescue Wilno, too, as a city worthy of gracing the map of Europe, recuperating its (semi)Western past from its assumed invisibility under Russian-communist occupation. Wilno is presented as a city where Milosz grew up in the same “cultural circuit” as his contemporaries across “France, Holland, or America” (59). Milosz enumerates popular movies, books, and theater performances that kept Wilno “parallel in time with the rest of the world” – and Poland even “had better organized theaters than many ‘Western’ countries” (60). Here emerges the image of Wilno as a vibrant confluence of contending university cultures, political options, religions, ethnicities, and languages, its “cosmopolitan fragments …probably…closer to Paris than to Warsaw” (“Dictionary of Wilno Streets” 46). Within this multicultural space Milosz politically affiliates himself with Jewish anti-nationalist, intellectual movements throughout the 1920-30s because of their opposition to anti-Semitism and their Leftist internationalist convictions pitched against Polish and Lithuanian Right-wing parties (“City” 56; “Nationalities” 95). But already in the 1930s there is a sense of impending doom, which will be brought on by Nazism and later by Soviet occupation and communist dictatorship.

According to Milosz, had it not been for these foreign interventions characterized by extreme, fanatic ideological allegiances, locally grown nationalisms would not have amounted to much. While the Polish are “excitable and anarchic,” they “seem not to lose moral restraints,” and lack the “discipline” that would “justify cruelties committed in cold blood” (“Nationalities” 104). Of course, this distinction conveniently serves to elevate locally grown nationalist violence above Nazi ruthlessness and, what is particularly significant for our purposes, Soviet fanaticism.
Milosz frequently grieves over Soviet/communist occupation of the once vibrant, modern, European cities, and in doing so effectively promotes narratives of authentic innocence, of “noble savagery” prior to the fall. While Wilno’s tragedy is great, it is still to be expected as the city is semi-Western and under considerable Russian influence historically; however, in the case of Prague, a “Western European capital,” at stake is an unnatural and bungled, almost artificial penetration of the West by the East (“Journey to the West” 59). For Brodsky, civilization moves from South to North; for Milosz, “the flow of ideas, like the colonization of primeval forest lands and steppes, [is] a movement from West to East” (“Russia” 130). Seen from this perspective, any reversal seems abnormal.

As a result, the prewar Prague of Milosz’s 1931 travels, described as a carnivalesque, pansexual paradise, with “couples kissing…hot, jostling, embracing humanity” and “effervescent air of laughter and music, its taverns in the narrow streets near Hradcany Castle” is contrasted with the desexualized and barren 1950 Prague, where Milosz sees only the “huge fellow with the face of a hoodlum, wearing the uniform of the Czech Security Police” and a “handful of people in dark, ill-fitting suits…whispering among themselves” (“Journey” 59-60). The reader is then transported to yet another Eastern Bloc city, Warsaw, which similarly features “Colorless streets in the twilight. Pedestrians walk[ing] quickly, with downcast eyes” (60).

In these portrayals, Russia at first looms as an aggressive, masculine bully who rapes the incomparably weaker opponents such as Poland, Czech Republic, or Hungary. Milosz would thus seem to arouse sympathy for the East-Central European damsels in distress, yet his rapid realignment of gendered attributes along the traditional lines of the effeminate East and the masculine West betrays his investment in Orientalist rhetoric and the validity of the Western subject who alone can survey, map, narrate – in short, successfully penetrate and conquer – the
“world.” Unlike the healthily, not aggressively, masculine West, Russia is given to extremes, to a pathological need to flaunt its power and colonize, yet without the necessary tool, so to speak. Therefore, castrated Russia’s imperialist interventions appear prosthetic, pitiful, and superficial. Milosz overhears Soviet commissars speaking of Baltic and Polish territories acquired, and compares them to “Alices in Wonderland” who think of these countries not with friendliness, but with “envy and anger” (59).

On another occasion, he hints at the frustration of Soviet attempts to conquer Europe despite military might; they simply lack the finesse, and can only exclaim “Europe is ours” with a “threatening tone, the revenge” brought on by ”Russian self-inebriation” (74). In contrast, Milosz, the emancipated Easterner (or the half-Westerner) possesses this secret knowledge of conquest, or as he says, “[I] understood more of the entangled, never straight paths of civilization” (74). While a Russian can only treat France, for instance, with “contempt, because…discreet and hidden, [it] was inaccessible to him,” Milosz “penetrated her gradually, beginning with that summer in 1931” (74; emphasis mine). Perhaps it is not surprising then that Milosz provocatively casts Russia as a woman who needs a Polish husband, employing a traditionally colonialist trope of a country which cannot govern “herself” but must be governed.

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These gendered paradigms are significant in their relationship to the discursive positions of unequal power because the “official” narrative, of course, is still the one of Poland and other Eastern Bloc countries as weaklings threatened by the uncouth Russian bear. My intention is not to downplay in the least the gravity of Soviet occupation of the Eastern Bloc, but rather to point to the ideological blindness to racist discourses which underlie expressions of outrage at this historical injustice. There is a movement in both Brodsky and Milosz toward recognizing such
discursive racism and deconstructing European hierarchies that they themselves help to establish, but these exceed the scope of this paper. For now, I wish to highlight the discursive practices which attempt to naturalize post-communist “transitions” to democracy and neoliberal capitalism as something “normal,” “civilized,” as “the only way.” This “only way” becomes justified through the tradition of demonizing communist regimes and political thought, of warning against the supposedly dangerous Marxist utopianism, and of portraying Eastern European societies as perpetual disciples of the “progressive” West. The problem is, of course, that this discourse of “civilization” embellishes the economic, political, and cultural dependencies created in Eastern Europe during the abandonment of “barbaric” communism: a subordinate position to or within the EU, growing class differences enshrining the local neocolonial elites, service economies, and a widespread loss of socialist benefits.
Works Cited


