

# Reading Myths



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**In his essays and letters written during the occupation, Czesław Miłosz questions the roots of totalitarianism and challenges myths of European culture**

The story of *Legends of Modernity* by Czesław Miłosz is rather complex; the book comprises essays written during the Nazi occupation of Poland between 1942-1944, alongside the author's wartime correspondence with Jerzy Andrzejewski, his long-time friend and fellow author. Faced eye to eye with a difficult historical reality, Miłosz challenged a variety of myths long sustained by European culture.

He turned this purging experience into the foundation underlying the book's coherent message: in the chapter concerning Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, he contested the common belief into the inherent goodness of nature and humankind. In his essay on Balzac, he showed where civilization built by isolated individuals at the mercy of natural evolution can lead; he undermined the myths of urban life and of progress. The chapters on Stendhal, Nietzsche, and Gide analyze the cult of power constructed on moral nihilism, a sense of completely unrestricted human freedom. The essay "Beyond Truths and Untruths" brought forward a critique of pragmatic religious philosophy, which – falling in conflict with natural sciences – became, at most, a longing of the heart.

The essay "Wartime Survival," recalling episodes from Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, posed fundamental questions the author was yet to resolve himself: "Assuming that civilization in its current state is basically flawed, does

the reader" – meaning a potential reformer – "wish to raze it down and start again, educating masses in a fraternity of poverty and lost individuality? Or, rather, acknowledging – whether consciously or unconsciously – the tradition of Western Christianity, would he instead renew, enrich, and improve the civilization, transforming outdated institutions and adapting them to new challenges?" It can be safely said that the attempt to overthrow the legend presenting the inevitability of the revolution remains unresolved. However, the author stressed the consequences of actions striving to debunk myths, essential in the process of regenerating European civilization.

## **Book from Atlantis?**

Miłosz published some of the essays from *Legends of Modernity* soon after the war in various collections he put together in exile; the set as a whole, together with a fascinating yet highly controversial preface by Jan Błoński, was finally published in 1996. Why controversial? According to Błoński, Miłosz's concerns that Poland and the world had taken "a rather unexpected detour in both 1942 and 1943" did not come true. In order to understand the book, it is necessary for the readers to use their literary imaginations and take note of Miłosz's envisioned readers: with Witkacy and Schulz, Baczyński and Gajcy, Trzebiński and Herbert, Różewicz and Przyboś among them. Sadly, all but the last three perished in the war, while many others – not mentioned by name, including the author of the cycle – lived in exile, and Polish culture – entering the period of social realism – severed its ties with the outside world. According to Błoński, the issues noted by Miłosz have become incomprehensible, arriving from nowhere and heading nowhere, while the essay collection itself has become a phantom; a book from Atlantis. "The issues which tormented both writers" – Miłosz and Andrzejewski – "in 1943, just a few years later became not so much anachronistic as a-chronistic, carried in an unreal or abstract environment, where words meant something



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**Czesław Miłosz's *Legends of Modernity* comprises essays written during the Nazi occupation between 1942-1944...**

quite different... or meant nothing at all." Błoński returns to this notion in the conclusion of his introduction: "It is understandable why Miłosz didn't publish his essays immediately after the war. Why, though, did he wait for so long once he emigrated? They had lost their literary context somewhat; they referred to thoughts and events which were out of date or perceived differently."

I cannot say why Miłosz didn't publish the book in exile, but there could have been any number of reasons, such as his breaking off contact with Andrzejewski. One thing is certain: the decision was unfortunate, since

it obliterated the affinity of Miłosz's work with other important post-war essays on totalitarianism and ways of salvaging European culture, then slowly emerging from wartime destruction. Miłosz was not "a-chronistic"; rather, in confrontation with the Western world, he actually turned out to be avant-garde, precursory, vigilant, demanding, and at once modern and post-modern.

### European parallels

The parallels between Miłosz's essays and the work of Horkheimer and Adorno's "The Dialectic of Enlightenment" have been pointed

out by Mateusz Werner, but these were not the only such affinities. Miłosz had just as much in common with Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, written in the latter 1940s. They both saw the crisis of post-war culture as unprecedented and requiring extraordinary action; they both believed that the roots of the calamity could be uncovered through comprehensive and unhurried analysis. They both attached a great deal of importance to a critique of the legends that had seized the European imagination and European codes of values. They also followed similar paths: while Miłosz argued against the concept of innate goodness, supposedly expressed by Defoe's Robinson Crusoe – in reality a master and colonizer of unknown lands he conquered unlawfully – Arendt wrote with critical passion of British colonial myths, which were not so much an echo of “naïve imaginations of primitive peoples, but dreams of everything that is best in European and Christian tradition, even when all that remains is idle boyhood ideals.”

Miłosz and Arendt were in surprising agreement in their critique of Proust. This outstanding writer, fully immersed in his own, artificial environment, was to the wartime Miłosz someone who existed in a world of “sophisticated internal experiences” and had lost touch with historical reality.

However, the similarities between the works of Miłosz and Arendt do not just involve a series of converging quotes, similar metaphors, analogous comparisons and literary references from Balzac, Conrad, Proust, and Nietzsche. Rather, they stem from a similar attitude to social reality which they both widely critiqued in the original sense of the word, bearing in mind traditions of the Frankfurt school, providing an important reference point for Arendt during the writing of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Miłosz felt similarly during his fundamental attempt to come to grips with 19th-century concepts of movement and progress.

### Miłosz and Benjamin

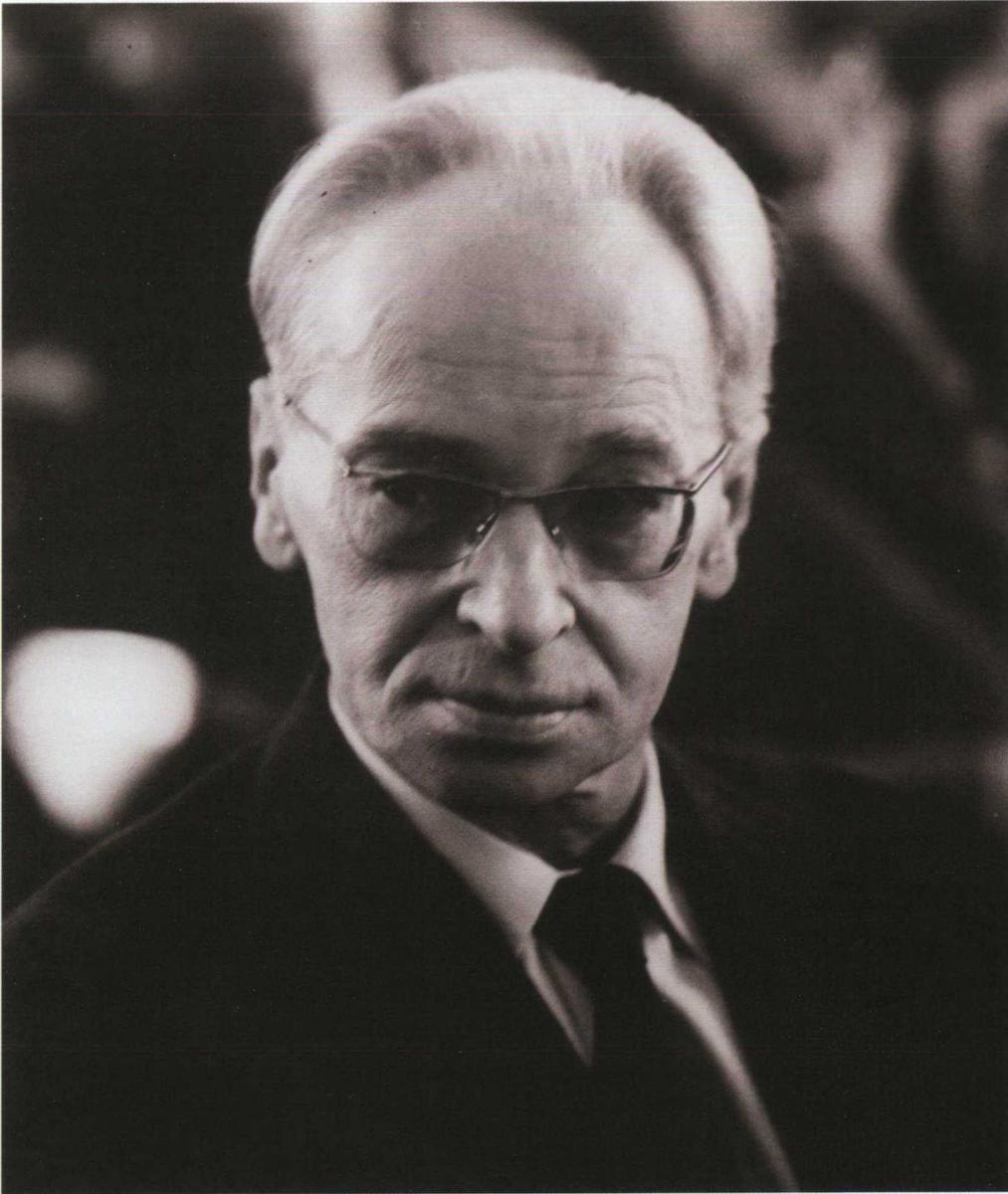
However, *Legends of Modernity* was about more than just a critique of European myths, and it was not a comprehensive representation of the author's position. This is shown by the unexpected and at first glance shocking analogies linking Miłosz with Walter Benjamin; after all, Benjamin is considered a Marxist-leaning apologist for modern civi-

lization and contemporary cities. In reality, his Marxism is not undisputable; in Andrzej Kopacki's view, Benjamin's works merely contain “Marxist components.” His attitude to modernity is also ambiguous; it is symbolized by Paul Klee's painting “Angelus Novus”: a mysterious figure facing the past pushing against the storm, seen by commentators as progress or the course of history. They are also linked by their common interest in Baudelaire's essay “The Painter of Modern Life,” which Miłosz had translated in the mid-1930s, but then lost his manuscript during the war. In spite of various reservations voiced by Baudelaire, in one of his essays Miłosz accepted his philosophy of artificiality; the belief that humanity is built not following the concept of natural goodness (as posited by the utopian Rousseau), but rather in opposition to natural instinct, by stepping away from biological and innate conditioning.

And the similarities run deeper: they touch upon the very essence of both writers' artistic pursuits. Arendt wrote that Benjamin thought poetically, and that to him metaphor was the greatest, most mysterious gift of speech. It might seem that in Miłosz's case, the literary value of his essays requires no explanation, but this is far from being the case. Comparing the press commentaries of his earlier years (severe and coarse) with *Legends of Modernity* reveals that his choice of taking a literary approach to truth-seeking is deeply thought through, or even the only option: “But to discover parts of this complex mechanism” – meaning war – “is not something possible right now. That's why we must seek the help of writers who try to formulate feelings which are at least similar if not the same.” Both Benjamin and Miłosz shared the view of a crisis of European culture; they also did not settle on just stating this fact, but took action in order to try and salvage it.

### Sources of evil and salvation

Miłosz's attitude to the remaining protagonists of the *Legends* – Baudelaire, Gide, Tolstoy, Witkacy, William James, and even Nietzsche – was also far more ambivalent than we might suppose. The critique of European myths inherent in the works of those authors does not exclude another, positive way of recalling their works; it



...as well as the author's wartime correspondence with Jerzy Andrzejewski. In *Legends*, Miłosz contemplates the myths of European culture

did not erase history or literature. This was an attempt at a new way of harnessing European traditions, with a belief in writers' responsibility for the shape of the world around them at its core. Miłosz wrote, "It seems to me that the judgment passed on 'intellectuals' by political accident does not ultimately tip the scales against them. On the contrary: the duties they took upon themselves have cleansed intellectualism from many faults, in particular from the sin of escaping reality. There is too much lazy comfort in it; too much escapism into 'safety'. If during the First World War many observers looked upon European nations slaughtering one another as though it was a wretched, unnecessary and senseless spectacle from an intellectual perspective, then during the Second World War they must have realized that these was the final stakes;

that it is about their own 'to be or not to be'; as such, it is certainly not a subject for pacifist novels."

Miłosz noted both sources of evil and a hope for salvation in European culture. He stressed this ambivalence with the title of the book: the word "legend," according to the semantics of Latin word *lego, lectum*, means both "to gather" and "to pick". Written during the dark time of the occupation, Miłosz's essays were critical of Europe while also being an expression - filled with hope and a sense of responsibility - of a belief in its salvation. ■

#### Further reading:

Czesław Miłosz. *Legends of Modernity: Essays and Letters from Occupied Poland*, including introduction by Jan Błoński, 1996, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie; English translation: *Legends of Modernity: Essays and Letters from Occupied Poland*, translated by Madeline Levine, 2005; New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux