

*A Bus Full of Prophets: Adventures of the
Eastern-European Intelligentsia*

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It is certainly not the mission of the mind to defend the world dominance of money. Hardly any system was so detrimental to the basic human values as that of capitalism.

— Erick Kahler

What is this world—the world of politics, of “modern civilization,” of great capital cities (Washington, London, Paris), the world of contemporary economics, television, large newspapers, of the parliament and the Pentagon — what is this world in the eyes of a poet? To be sure, that mighty world cares precious little about the opinions of poets: it can very well do without them. But poets also seem to attach little importance to the forms of today’s civilization, except, perhaps, for sporadic outbursts of moralist outrage caused by a war or some other vagary of the powers that be. Poets usually treat the world of real politics with scorn, and the world of real politics would scorn poets, if it only knew about their existence. Of course you expect me to defend the vision of a poet and to speak with contempt about the modern world. As a matter of fact, I am not sure I will.

Conservative thinkers predicted that the twentieth-century culture would inevitably break up into small “provinces.” It would be fragmented and deprived of an integrated vision of reality. Indeed, that is what has happened: poets, composers, painters, all live within self-contained and self-satisfied professional enclaves and scramble for recognition almost exclusively within their own sects. In many respects members of such artistic clans differ very little from, say, an association of stamp collectors. In the past to be a poet was to defend a certain vision of the world, to be a prophet though not necessarily in the biblical spirit — to struggle for an ideal of civilization and not for some narrow political premise.

Even the nineteenth century resembled a bus crowded with prophets— sometimes angry and sometimes happy, sometimes depressed, and sometimes howling in rage. Do we have to recall their names? Dostoyevsky, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Blake, and in Poland — Mickiewicz and Norwid. In our century this bus has shrunk. I am not speaking about the esthetic quality of writing. I am concerned rather with the philosophical passion, the fervent advocacy of a certain image of the world.

Paradoxically, this shrinking was often the contribution of great poets and prose writers — John Keats, for example, who from the depth of his brilliant youth put forth the concept of “negative capability,” which according to him inspired great spirits of literature. Today poets a hundred times smaller than Keats like to evoke his theorem and quietly cultivate their own esthetic rice paddies. Thomas Mann, some three generations younger than Keats and a man capable of telling the most captivating stories, developed the art of irony. His irony consisted in the interplay of two opposite ideas — for example, rationalism and irrationalism, or the Enlightenment and the Dark Ages — whose juxtaposition was supposed to bedazzle us with the depth of the chasm separating one from another. Thomas Mann’s ideological opposite, an exquisite writer, Vladimir Nabokov, encouraged his colleagues, with typically Russian persistence, to rid themselves of any thought unrelated to literature.

It is easy to notice that the nineteenth-century bus carried prophets of almost exclusively conservative leanings. The fact that today this race is almost extinct cannot be explained only by the internal ferments of literature. The new, increasingly self-confident world of liberal capitalism discouraged candidates for prophets; it did not persecute them, but deprived them of faith in their own powers. If a metaphor can be allowed bordering on graphomania, this new liberal-capitalist model of civilization was like a dangerously low overpass that severed not only the roof of the bus, but also the heads of its passenger—the great, inspired, defiant writers.

This race did not die out entirely. Lionel Trilling in his wonderful book *The Liberal Imagination* reminds us that writers of conservative political views were still dominant in the Modernist generation. (Yes, the revolutionaries of Modernism, T. S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats, were conservative — which should tell us something about the nature of that revolution.) Trilling's book is a good illustration of the basic dilemma of spiritual creativity in our times — the meeting of the conservative imagination (“every powerful imagination is conservative,” said Hugo von Hofmannsthal) with the liberal capitalist model of society. It can be objected that I present here an anachronistic issue that may have concerned Yeats's contemporaries, but hardly artists living today, who have reconciled themselves with their society. And even if they have not, they attack the society from very different premises — from the left or from the extreme left.

I could answer as follows: contemporary writers are quite familiar with the dilemma described by Trilling. One example would be Czeslaw Milosz. Even if it may seem that the conflict is abating, I am quite convinced that it will return in the future. Powerful imaginations will naturally seek polemical engagement with the society of mass consumption. Besides, I often have the impression that manifestations of the leftist aggression against the liberal society are like a mirror reflection of similar complaints by conservative writers. Read again the Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard and ponder whether his anger has nothing to do with the despair of Charles Baudelaire or Gustave Flaubert,

But what does all that have to do with transformations of the civilization of Eastern Europe? Let us say that connections between the general problems of artistic imagination in the epoch of liberal capitalism and the East European situation can be observed in at least two different areas.

First, there is the subjective domain. The author of these words has to explain his own ideological situation; he cannot discuss values and their transmutations without signaling his own position

and his own intellectual options. Besides, the social structure of this small continent called Eastern Europe is different from that of Western societies in many ways, not least because of the major role played in this region by the intelligentsia.

Let me start with a self-commentary. The motto from an essay by a German thinker, Erich Kahler, and especially its first part — “It is certainly not the mission of the mind to defend the world dominance of money” — would sound quite convincing to me were it not for my own political experiences. Until the age of thirty-six I was a subject of a totalitarian system that was governed neither by spirit nor by money, but simply by secret police. The Soviet-style totalitarianism, especially in its period of decline, existed only through inertia. In my country it was a colonial inertia, an order imposed from Moscow rather than from Warsaw. This political system was dead, incapable of any evolution, fulfilling itself only in various restrictions, prohibitions, and regulations. It was totally uncreative, destructive toward material and spiritual culture. Even if since 1956 on it had been possible to “get by” in my country, because Stalinism was replaced with a rather passive version of Khrushchevism, life was still marked by a lack of confidence in the future, a lack of social energy, and by general apathy. One lived more against the system rather than within the system. One lived in contempt of a system that killed every hope. In the second half of the 1970s the system even tolerated a sort of political opposition, but remained lifeless, closed, and provincial.

These matters are rather well known, and I mention them only in order to point out a certain property of the Soviet totalitarianism: it created a civilization so wretched that the world of the liberal-capitalist civilization — the world that provoked animosity and antagonism among the European aristocracy of the spirit — appeared almost perfect when regarded from inside the totalitarian domain. Western democracy seemed perfectly beautiful: there was no tyranny, no degrading presence of the secret police, no censorship, no flimsiness of architecture and of everyday objects. The

Communist lens made the Western world seem like the world in a novel: it was the universe of the human comedy as depicted by Honoré de Balzac. We did not idealize this Western civilization too much — we saw its swindlers and liars, venal politicians and greedy merchants, we saw the boredom of long Sundays and the boredom of overrefined artists, we were aware of the aggressiveness of journalists, the dullness of country parish priests, and the stupidity of movie stars. We saw it all, and yet we admired that imperfect world because the human comedy is a deeply touching thing, and probably nothing better can ever be created. One can only terrorize it, freeze it, subject it to constant blackmail. This is what totalitarianism does, when it calls the human comedy a “society of capitalist exploitation,” a “decadent product of late capitalism,” or — in Nazi Germany — a “Jewish-Masonic conspiracy.”

We also saw — this plural pronoun also contains my friends and acquaintances — that a certain kind of quiet heroism was needed to sustain a free society. We understood well that all this colorful, infinitely diverse carnival of human life — or human comedy — could exist only through the concerted efforts of thousands of people. Some of them could appear rather comic in their daily endeavors. Is it possible not to smile at the labors of office clerks, bureaucrats, customs officers? Apparently the defense of human comedy against sudden destruction must evoke a smile among those who look at it from a distance. We also understood — though it took us some time to acquire this knowledge — that economics is one of the primary motivations of a free society. The phantom of prosperity moves people to action just as a mechanical hare excites racing dogs to their chase. The Western societies know not only phantasmagoric opulence, but also quite real wealth, and although it is in vogue to sneer at millionaires, it is also true that poor societies are an easier prey to dictators and that in general wealth favors civilization. We understood that the democratic countries had created a certain way of life that was entirely real — that it was an answer to some deep, if hard to define, needs of

human nature. This way of life is also fragile. It is fragile because the human comedy is not defended by any powerful ideology. The human comedy is the antithesis of utopia. Plato, Søren Kierkegaard, and Karl Marx would not spring to its defense. Only moderate thinkers like Alexis de Tocqueville would show it some understanding. The world of the human comedy is fragile also because within its domain a quiet, everyday heroism has replaced the more classical kind of heroism typical of militaristic-aristocratic societies.

I hope I have sketched the epistemological situation of someone living in a Communist country clearly enough. And even if this someone — that is, me — would be inclined to adopt a rather aristocratic perspective and to pay homage to artistic and religious imagination rather than to the rules of the free market, he would find it difficult to forget and to renounce his totalitarian experience. Therefore I have no intention of repudiating my old affinity to the human reality as it was described by Balzac. I think I can reveal now that I do not agree with the thesis expressed by Erich Kahler. Yes, it is the mission of the human mind to defend money and the market economy, though it should not be its exclusive and uncritical mission.

And now let me take a leap into the area of sociology and have a look — as I have promised to do — at the intelligentsia as a social stratum and at its role in the historical process. Experts usually agree that the intelligentsia as a separate social group — separate from the middle class or the bourgeoisie — developed only in Eastern and Central Europe. Specialists quarrel whether the very term “intelligentsia” first came into use in Russia or in Poland. The Poles claim that it happened in Poland, and the Russians — in Russia.

Of course the Russian intelligentsia is far better known in the West. It has been portrayed in so many magnificent Russian novels. But the intelligentsia also played a prominent role in nineteenth-century Poland. I do not know if you remember what East-Central and Eastern Europe was in the nineteenth century.

It was a zone of historical disasters. Mature nations of this area — Poles, Czechs, Hungarians — were deprived of their own statehood. The Russians apparently achieved a tremendous success: they built an empire and defeated Napoleon; Russian Cossacks entered Paris (even today Paris cafes are called *bistros*, from the Russian word *bystro*, fast). But a large portion of Russian society — and especially the Russian intelligentsia — perceived those successes as disasters, because Russia was the laughingstock of Europe. It was a country without historical consciousness (Pyotr Chaadayev wrote about it) and a country of slaves (Astolphe de Custine).

This context allows us to define the intelligentsia as a class that lives *on*, *off*, and *against* a historical disaster. In other words the intelligentsia is a “leisure class,” but in a different sense than proposed by Thorstein Veblen. The intelligentsia’s “leisure” consists in the fact that its intellectual activity is divorced from the power structure of a state. The fact that the intelligentsia made itself manifest only in the East does not mean that France or England did not have many educated people who lived the life of ideas. In fact such people must have been much more numerous in the West (please do not ask me for figures). But in France or in England the local thinking classes merged with the existing political apparatus. They strived for parliamentary seats (like de Tocqueville), lectured at universities, supported mass political parties. Eastern Europe, however, could hardly offer its intellectuals positions in the government or university chairs. And even if some intellectuals did take official positions, they spent their best hours conspiring against their employers.

The intellectual energy of the intelligentsia resulted from a certain surplus of thought, from ideas that were not invested in the existing circulation of political or economic creativity. A rather extreme—but also typical—example is a group of prominent Polish émigrés who arrived in Paris after the failure of the Polish national uprising of 1830. Here was the Polish intelligentsia in an

almost elemental form: small gentry, aristocracy, former army officers, former soldiers of the insurrection. As part of the French world they were of no consequence, although they were received with warmth, even enthusiasm, in France, in Belgium, and in Germany, which they had to cross on their way into exile. This group of outcasts created an unbelievable number of periodicals and political clubs, not to mention the modern literary culture of the Polish language. Of course this intelligentsia was building on a defeat.

There is no doubt that the main desire and primary goal of the intelligentsia is to quit the condition of defeat. As it was rightly observed (Alexander Gella), the intelligentsia was essentially striving for self-annihilation: when defeat turns into victory, there is no more reason for an intelligentsia to exist. That is what has happened in Russia, where communism destroyed its intelligentsia, which was predominantly leftist and utopian in its political leanings. That is also what has happened in Poland after World War I. Polish independence, regained after 125 years during which the Polish nation existed within three different states, deprived the intelligentsia of its main purpose of existence: the spiritual custody of the nation. The early books by Witold Gombrowicz can be interpreted as a satirical self-portrait of a member of the intelligentsia, who is no longer able to accept the world view of his own social group and who is amused by its language, its solemnity, and its mythology.

After World War II Communists wanted to eliminate the Polish intelligentsia in a more intelligent way than in the earlier attempts by the Nazi occupiers. While the latter resorted to mass executions, the former tried to infect the intelligentsia with the virus of Stalinism. Surprisingly, they were largely successful. But as early as 1956 there was a sudden reawakening: the same, mostly young, intellectuals who for the previous six or seven years had been vigorously propagating Stalin's ideas suddenly regained their ability to see, to hear, and to tell the truth. They were able to

expose the despotic nature of totalitarianism with great, and unexpected, clarity.

This process resulted in a rebirth of the intelligentsia as a group of quasi-charismatic leaders of the society. In the mid-1970s members of the Warsaw intelligentsia initiated the Polish opposition movement, and a year later every major city had its own circle of the rebellious intelligentsia. The rest is history: the triumph of the first Solidarity, the struggles of the period of martial law, and finally the end of the Communist domination. Those who observe the events in Eastern Europe now are also aware that the intelligentsia is paying dearly for its own success. Hostility toward the intelligentsia is on the rise, and the so-called intelligentsia ethos is a subject of stinging, bitter criticism. “Enough of the intelligentsia,” write large newspapers. “We want the middle class, we want businessmen.”

This recent, though already bygone, triumphant era of the intelligentsia — from the mid-1970s to late 1980s—was characterized by an abundance of ethical, and later political and economic, reflection. It was also a period of activity — of courageous defense of the persecuted. At the same time, however, the intelligentsia was suspended in a kind of cultural vacuum. It controlled neither the political nor the economic reality. As in the nineteenth century, it found itself again in a dramatic and paradoxical position: it was operating outside the actual historical process and was reduced to rhetorical statements and symbolic acts. Although it was shaping the future, the present was beyond its reach. Fundamental structures of social life continued to disintegrate, and the economy — especially in the 1980s — continued to collapse. There was a growing chasm between the intelligentsia, or at least that part of it involved in the opposition movement, and the rest of the society.

Results of both of these processes can be recognized today. The intelligentsia had practically no opportunity to educate, to propagate its ideas, to edify the young generation and other social groups. The famous alliance between the intelligentsia and the

workers during the time of the first Solidarity was too short-lived to provide a foundation for a permanent compact. Besides, the apparent disparity of economic interests (apparent, and only during the period of transition, because in more affluent societies everybody is more affluent) quickly terminated those flirtations.

When the detestable communism finally fell, some members of the intelligentsia tried to cover themselves with the mantle of pseudo-prophets. "We were struggling for Freedom and the Brotherhood of Men," was heard from various quarters. "And what did we get? Just plain, ordinary capitalism!" This period revealed a certain weakness within the attractive yet confused anti-totalitarian thinking, whose best example may be that of the former writer-dissident and present president of the Czech Republic, Václav Havel. This school of thought seemed to promise some new, as yet unknown, social order built on human solidarity and love. Other intellectuals started to seek salvation in national traditions as a supposed counterbalance for the "American" free market ideology.

These are, perhaps, matters of secondary importance. Few people seem to trouble themselves with those intellectual games. What is more important, however, is the persistence of a social division originating in the Communist era. It is the division into the political elite of intellectual provenience, which was able to create within the totalitarian environment a numerically scarce but highly active *civil society*, and politically passive masses subject to impersonal laws of social dynamics. Someone can say that those masses of people, who go on strike, vote for antireformist parties, or refuse to participate in elections, are, after all, defending their own interests and minding their pocketbooks. This claim, however, is not true. In fact the masses are acting against their own interests by delaying the process of change that sooner or later will also prove beneficial for them. They act this way because they lack political imagination, the ability to reason in terms of the future, to abstract themselves momentarily from their present condition,

and to anticipate future events. This kind of imagination seems to be an attribute of civil societies, which do not forget their interests, yet at the same time are capable of temporarily suspending their claims. But the people — one can object — those huge, passive masses, live in poverty. They defend themselves any way they can. Let me answer again that this is wrong.

The same masses — as it has been frequently observed — long for the false sense of security offered them by totalitarianism; the security of assured employment, of holidays in group vacation homes, of supervision by the security forces. It was a security of powerlessness, ubiquitous, yet not radical poverty, and the innocuous boredom of the state television.

Can we blame the intelligentsia for its failure to inspire the masses with enthusiasm for life in freedom, for the Balzacian human comedy in a political system that does not offer protection from every kind of risk, but does grant the right to live in dignity?

To a certain degree we can indeed blame the intelligentsia for that failure, especially considering the first two years after the fall of communism when the educational efforts of the new government — the new political class — were miserably weak in relation to the scope of change engulfing Poland and the rest of the region. Those changes did not affect merely certain elements of the political or economic order — they were a part of a profound mutation of the entire civilization. And here the intellectuals definitely failed in their role as leaders and instructors of the society.

Let us not forget, however, that with the downfall of communism the intelligentsia entered a difficult phase of internal evolution. Since it flourishes only during historical disasters, a victory leaves it unprepared to take a new kind of authoritative action with direct, palpable, and statistically accountable results in mind.

At the time of the triumph — the collapse of the totalitarian order — the intelligentsia resembled a meteorite entering the earth's atmosphere: it heated up, burned, and finally disintegrated — though not entirely. Fragments of a huge meteorite can

reach the surface of the earth. The intelligentsia that existed inside the totalitarian system was not subject to cynical laws of supply and demand, advertising, electoral popularity, demagoguery, and social pedagogy. When it entered the atmosphere of earthly liberal society, it broke into pieces. It gave birth to a new political class, the middle class, the administration, and so forth. The tiny fragments of meteorites that geologists find on the surface of the earth can be compared to the members of the intelligentsia, who even in the new political reality — today we see only its beginning and hope it will take root — will defend other values, such as honor, selflessness, artistic and metaphysical imagination. They will accept the new reality, but will do it polemically. They will try to preserve the treasures accumulated during their long cosmic journey.

(Translated by Jaroslaw Anders)

ELEGY

Adam Zagajewski

It was a grey landscape, houses small
 as Tartar horses, concrete high-rises,
 gigantic, still-born; uniforms everywhere, rain,
 sleepy rivers that didn't know where to flow,
 dust, Soviet gods with bloated eyelids,
 the acid smell of gas, the sweet smell of boredom.
 filthy trains, dawns red with sleeplessness.

It was a tiny landscape, unending winters
 in which — as in crowns of old linden trees —
 sparrows and knives and friendship and leaves of treason lived;
 villages streets like frozen arrows, narrow meadows; on a park bench
 someone played an accordion, idly,
 and for a moment one could breathe an air
 lighter than fatigue.

It was a waiting room with brown walls,
a courtroom, a clinic; a place
where tables groaned with files
and ashtrays choked with ashes.
It was silence, or loudspeakers shouting.
A waiting room where one had
to wait a whole life to be born.

Our rapid loves that lasted so long,
our superb laughter, ironies, triumphs,
are perhaps still withering away in a police station
on the edge of a map, on the brink of imagination.
These voices, this hair of the dead.
These chronometers of our desire.
It was a time filled with nothingness.

It was a black landscape, only mountains were blue
and rainbows slant. There were no promises and no hope,
but we lived there, and we were not foreigners.
It was the life given to us.
It was patience, pale as a glacier.
Fear, filled with guilt. Courage,
filled with anxiety. It was anxiety, filled with force.

(Translated from the Polish by the author
with Jonathan Aaron)