

**A Wretched Subjectivity:  
Eastern Europe in Czesław Miłosz’s *Captive Mind***

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*The Captive Mind*, by Nobel laureate Czesław Miłosz, is a landmark work of the twentieth century. Like George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1990) and Albert Camus’s *The Plague* (2002), it examines the historical phenomenon of what Western intellectuals, such as Hannah Arendt, termed “totalitarianism” (1994). More specifically, Miłosz explores human subjectivity in Eastern Europe during the Cold War. Tony Judt has hailed the book as “by far the most insightful and enduring account of the attraction of [Eastern European] intellectuals to Stalinism” (2010).

Though similar to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *The Plague*, *The Captive Mind* is not a novel, but a work of nonfiction. Published in 1953, it is an analysis of the thinking and psychology of its contemporary Eastern Europe (Miłosz 2001, xv). It is narrated by its author, who identifies himself as a poet (250–51). It also includes historical analyses — of its author’s own life, of the fate of Eastern Europe, of the East and of the West.

Miłosz describes his main goal as follows: “I try to explain how the human mind functions in the people’s democracies” (xv). He defines the concept of “mind” holistically. He understands it as including both thinking and human psychology — as the equivalent of the entire inner life of humans. To capture its holism, this article uses the term “subjectivity” as a synonym for Miłosz’s concept.

“The people’s democracies” whose subjectivity Miłosz explores are the countries of Eastern Europe, and more specifically: Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Hungary, and the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (xv, 223, 225). These lands are Miłosz’s geographical focus. His temporal one is a crucial historical moment — the height of the Cold War, when the entire globe was “torn asunder” between the capitalist, self-avowedly “democratic,” West, and the socialist East, headed by the Soviet Union — in “a ruthless battle for world domination” (xi).

As a twentieth-century classic, *The Captive Mind* has attracted the sustained attention of scholars. Thus, they have analyzed many of its fundamental aspects. They have

examined its place in the evolution of Miłosz's oeuvre and thought (Možeiko 1988, 1–29; Nathan and Quinn 1991, 31–64). They have explored the intellectual influences on the book, such as Simone Weil, as well as its philosophical content, such as Miłosz's thinking on the problem of good and evil (Nathan and Quinn 1991, 34–40, 53). Interpreters have also explored Miłosz's memory of witnessing the Holocaust — which he shares in the book (Golubiewski 2018, 76–77). As Miłosz's focus is Cold-War Eastern Europe, critics have also considered key aspects of the Eastern Europe that he paints: the growth of a culture of mendacity, where people pretend to believe in the new Stalinist political order imposed on the region after World War II, while opposing it in their hearts and minds (Možeiko 1988, 15–16); the apostasy of Eastern European intellectuals to Stalinism (Levine 1988, 112–33; Walicki 1996, 485–94; Walicki 1999, 49–54; Grudzińska-Gross 1999, 60–63; Krzyżanowski 1999, 658–62; Anders 2009, 68; Franaszek 2017, 302–306); the temptation of the new Stalinist order for Miłosz himself (Coates 1988, 134–40). Significantly, scholars have assessed *The Captive Mind* praisefully — as a perspicacious and valid analysis of Eastern Europe's imprisoned subjectivity (Jaspers 1953, 13; Možeiko 1988, 15–16; Kurzweil 1999, 55; Walicki 1999; Judt 2010; Franaszek 2017, 304–306).

Despite this serious interest, however, scholars have not, to my knowledge, examined what I think is a highly significant aspect of *The Captive Mind*: the mode of Miłosz's representation of Eastern Europe. It consists of a set of distinct, characteristic terms in which Miłosz systematically paints the mentally and politically imprisoned region of his birth. The purpose of this article is to scrutinize this mode of representation.

In what follows, I argue that Miłosz represents Eastern Europe's subjectivity — its “captive mind” — as dominated and disordered by East and West. Miłosz's representation of that subjectivity, I argue further, is cast in terms of colonialism, of imperialism, and of what Edward Said called “Orientalism” — and it is an Orientalism with a Chinese dimension. As Miłosz paints it, Eastern Europe's mind has been incarcerated by its Orient; it has been Orientalized — and thereby debilitated seriously. But, as Miłosz sees it, Eastern Europe looks critically at the West as well, and it does so with a *vain* hope for redemption from mental-political oppression. Showing it as thus victimized by East and West, Miłosz nevertheless detects hopes for such a redemption of Eastern Europe, and indeed of humankind in general. For him, they glimmer in elemental human longings and in human alterity. Ultimately, this article reflects, critically, on the meaning of those hopes.

A key aspect of *The Captive Mind* consists of critical portraits of four prominent Polish literary figures of the Cold War: Jerzy Andrzejewski, Tadeusz Borowski, Jerzy Putrament, and Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński. These writers embraced the political order that Stalin's Soviet Union imposed on Eastern Europe after World War II. Giving them the pseudonyms of “Alpha,” “Beta,” “Gamma,” and “Delta,” respectively, Miłosz

scrutinizes why and how they chose to become proponents, and indeed prophets, of the new Stalinist order. Though forming a substantial portion of *The Captive Mind*, Miłosz's portraits of his fellow writers are outside the focus of this article. Miłosz's representation of Eastern Europe in terms of colonialism, imperialism, and Orientalism — as a realm of a wretched subjectivity — transpires most palpably in the rest of his book. Thus, this article explores this highly meaningful rest.

### 1. *A Victim of East and West: Miłosz's Representation of Eastern Europe*

Authored by a poet, *The Captive Mind* lays an emphatic claim to truth. Thus, it is dotted with meta-literary reflections. They define “the writer's essential task” as follows: “to look at the world from his own independent viewpoint, to tell the truth as he sees it, and so to keep watch and ward in the interest of society as a whole” (Miłosz 2001, xiv). Similarly: a poet “has no choice but to [...] place everything at stake in order to express what seems to him to be true” (217).<sup>1</sup> More, Miłosz claims special insight into Eastern Europe as an Eastern European. For him, only someone who has experienced his native region — its cataclysmic mid-twentieth-century history, its society, its culture — can fully understand them (78–79, 215–16). He himself was such an individual: he lived in Lithuania and Poland until the aftermath of World War II, and then defected to the West in 1951, having become disaffected with Cold-War Eastern Europe. His representation of Eastern Europe is, in a sense, that of a survivor of the region. One is reminded in this regard of Elie Wiesel's argument that only a survivor of the Holocaust can understand it adequately (Wiesel 1990, 7).<sup>2</sup> In sum, Miłosz claims to be a devout, and superiorly insightful, seeker and professor of truth about Eastern Europe.

What, then, is Miłosz's truth about Eastern Europe? Like the world of the 1950s, his Eastern Europe has been rent between East and West. This is its historical and existential condition. It is a turbulent liminal space, a focal battleground between East and West. And, as such, it has been victimized and disordered by these two foes.

Miłosz represents Eastern Europe from a historical perspective. He sketches its long history before World War II; he explores more specifically its experience of the War; and he dissects in greatest depth its subjectivity in the 1950s. Let us now look at this historical portrayal of the region.

#### 1.1 *Eastern Europe before World War II*

Before World War II, Eastern Europe was a *mélange* of native, Western, and Eastern cultures. These lands, says Miłosz, “have been subjected to Western influence for

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<sup>1</sup> The theme of literature's commitment to truth appears also on pages: 109–110, 115, 129–30, 215–16, 237, 248–51.

<sup>2</sup> In a similar vein, Calvin Bedient has argued that Miłosz's poetry is the poetry of a “survivor” of his tragic age (1985–1986, 236–37).

centuries” (2001, 43). The average Eastern European of the 1950s “is a part of an ancient civilization. [...] In school, much attention was devoted to his religious upbringing. [...] Obviously, too, he studied the history of his country. He read its former poets and philosophers with pleasure and pride. He was proud of its [long] battle to defend its frontiers and of its struggle for independence in the dark periods of foreign occupation” (17–18). An old culture, Eastern Europe has a long and turbulent history. Its culture is Western, but it has also created its own ideas and art.

Indeed, pre-World War II Eastern Europe was even more complex culturally. Vilnius, the city of Miłosz’s childhood and youth, was a rich cultural collage. Now the capital of Lithuania, in those years it was a part of Poland. It “was [...] unusually picturesque,” reminisces Miłosz (169). Together with its surrounding region, it was marked by linguistic and cultural diversity: a “number of languages and cultures,” including Polish, Lithuanian, Russian, Byelorussian, “co-existed there” (136–38, 169). The local peasants respected and followed “many” of their ancient “customs and habits” (136–37). The city had “scores of Catholic churches, built by Italian architects in the baroque style” (135–36). Miłosz’s university, secular in the 1930s, had been a Jesuit school in the past (137). Vilnius also had a vibrant Jewish community — “one of the most important centers of Jewish literature and learning in Europe” (136–37). The city, as Miłosz sums up his remembrance, “was a blend of Italian architecture and the Near East” (136).

But while the West shaped Eastern Europe before World War II, their cultural relationality has also been sinister. This darkness appears in a description of what 1950s Eastern European intellectuals think about the West’s perception of their region. And what they think is that, in the eyes of the West, their “countries [...] were traditionally ‘poor relations,’ a semi-colonial terrain. The West’s attitude toward them was in general patronizing,” and even one of “disdain” (44–45). To Miłosz’s Eastern European peers, the West, historically, wielded a sense of superiority over Eastern Europe, treating it as a colonial backyard. Miłosz never questions this view of his peers, implying that it may be true — that the West did see Eastern Europe as a kind of colony. He even echoes this Western scorn. He calls Vilnius’s surrounding region “an abandoned province of Europe” and “one of the most forsaken corners of Europe” (136, 139–40). He also shows that the Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) were, indeed, a victim of colonialism in the past. They “underwent an intensive colonization,” he says, “chiefly German and Polish, which marked the advance of Christianity” (225). Thus, Miłosz implies that Eastern Europe was, in historical reality, a “semi-colony” of the West. Though shaped by it, the region has not belonged to the West culturally. Historically, for Miłosz, it has been a borderline colony of the West.

But while scorned by the West, Eastern Europe has been superior vis-à-vis its own East: Russia. Miłosz notes that, historically, Eastern Europe was better than Russia.

Before the Cold War, he says, “the living standard of the masses in Russia was so much lower than that of the so-called people’s democracies” (61). Compared to Russia, the central part of Eastern Europe — Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland — boasted at that time a “greater” talent in the management of modern industry and technology, as well as a traditional culture of “greater refinement” (62). Prosperity also marked the Baltic countries. Before World War II, they had a “wealthy farming economy.” Their inhabitants “were so well off that they put the [...] [Soviet] Union to shame” (229). Describing Baltic individuals who were exiled to the interior of the Soviet Union as its perceived enemies after World War II, Miłosz writes: “A citizen of New York transplanted to a native village in the Congo would feel more or less as does an inhabitant of the Baltic countries transported beyond the Ural mountains — such are the differences in standards of cleanliness, hygiene, and the most external evidences of civilization” (233). This momentous comparison shows that, for Miłosz, the people of the Baltic countries, before their absorption into the Soviet Union during World War II, “stood on a definitely higher level of civilization than [...] Soviet citizens” (240).

Historically, Eastern Europe’s superiority to its East was, according to Miłosz, accompanied by Russophobia. The epicenter of that animus was Poland, where it was related to a turbulent past. “For centuries,” writes Miłosz, “Poland had been in a state of permanent [and sometimes victorious] war with Russia. [...] Then the scale tipped in favor of Moscow until at last, throughout the whole nineteenth century, the greater part of Poland was under Tsarist rule” (147). In line with this stormy past, Polish culture evolved a current of anti-Russian hatred. Thus: “the works of the greatest Polish poets” — “the classics, the creators of the literary language” — “are marked by a dislike of Russia” (22).

## *1.2 Eastern Europe during World War II*

This anti-Russian animus perdured during World War II. When Poland was divvied up between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union by the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of August 1939, its people turned against their Eastern neighbor (89–90). Then, as the Red Army was driving the Nazis out of Poland, the Soviet Union was not welcomed as a liberator; Polish nationalism inspired hatred against it (147–48, 159–60).

This popular hatred is a hatred of oppressed people toward their master. Miłosz portrays Eastern Europe during World War II as, quintessentially, a colony. As he sees it, the War concentrated its fury on Eastern Europe, ravishing it more drastically than Western Europe (ix, 25, 88). The War was a clash of two imperial colossi, bent on colonizing the middle ground between them. This is precisely what happened to Poland. Following the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, Hitler invaded it on September 1, igniting World War II. Stalin then struck from the East on September 17, gobbling up his own share of the country (89, 149–50). Miłosz describes Nazi Germany specifically as a brutal colonizer

of Poland. He calls it an “empire” and an “Imperium” (87, 111). What it planned to visit upon Poland after its invasion was ghastly — “to exterminate the educated class, to *colonize*, and to deport a segment of the population to the East [*italics mine*]” (111). Nazi Germany thus sought to ravage Poland as its colony. This was exactly what it set out to do after that fateful first day of September (87–88, 111).

But the Soviet Union, too, sought to dominate Poland during World War II. Miłosz paints wartime Poland as a victim both of its West and of its East. He symbolizes that fate by his account of the Warsaw uprising. That revolt was one of the greatest tragedies of World War II. Miłosz’s account is historically accurate. Taking place in the summer and early fall of 1944, he recounts, the uprising was organized by the Polish underground anti-Nazi resistance. Its aim was to liberate Poland from the Nazis, and to establish an independent Polish government. The revolt coincided with the advance of the Red Army from the East, which was pushing the German armies back to Berlin. When the uprising started, the Red Army had entered Warsaw and stopped at the Warsaw suburb Praga on the right bank of the Vistula river. The revolt was hopeless. The rebels fought heroically, but their overwhelming Nazi foes obliterated them. Meanwhile, the Soviets stood by callously. Loath to let Poland establish an independent government, and preparing to install their own puppet regime in it, they looked on passively from their positions as the Nazis massacred the rebels (94–98). The uprising, observes Miłosz, “was the revolt of a fly against two giants. One giant waited [...] for the other to kill the fly” (96). The two giants, he writes, were “savage” “conquerors” driven by “enmity toward all Poles” (151). As Miłosz sees it, Poland was a speck of a land, hated, dominated, and demolished by its conquistadors from its East and from its West.

Beyond Poland, thinks Miłosz, Eastern Europe as a whole was victimized by its West and its East during World War II. The Nazis treated the region as their colony. Miłosz compares the German occupation authorities in it, their brutal military and police forces, to a surreal figure, a dreadful demon. This is a “rider with [a] lasso,” who “appear[s] on a street [one] knows well, where cats sleep and children play, and start[s] catching passers-by with his lasso” (26–27). The rider’s victims were put in concentration camps or killed (27–28). Miłosz thus images the Nazis in Eastern Europe as wild, deadly cowboys. Their victims shared the fate of Native North Americans, colonized by a genocidal West.

Colonialism was also the fate of the Baltic countries during World War II. Like Poland, they too were helpless victims of their East and West. In 1940, following its capture of Poland the year before, the Soviet Union gobbled up Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. For Miłosz, that conquest was classic colonialism. “The invasion of the Spanish,” he writes, “must have been an appalling experience for the Aztecs. [...] The invasion of the Red Army was no less of a shock for the Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians” (227). The year after, Nazi Germany overran the Baltic countries, enthraling many of their people into forced

labor, and, far more tragically, launching the Holocaust in them (229). Ultimately, driving its Nazi foe out of Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union re-conquered the three countries in 1944. Thereupon, it embarked on absorbing them, and re-making them in its own Stalinist image. That re-making included: forcible collectivization, persecutions of opponents of Stalinism, including their deportation to the Soviet Union's eastern interior, replacement of the deportees with non-Baltic Soviet settlers, a thorough Russification, complete with a Russian political leadership (229–32). As in 1940, this was again classic colonialism. It was “an act,” declares Miłosz, “analogous only to some of the misdeeds of colonial politics” (246).<sup>3</sup>

### 1.3 *The Age of the Cold War: Orientalizing Eastern Europe*

This Eastern colonialism is the order of things in the 1950s. After World War II, thinks Miłosz, the entire Eastern Europe was turned into a colony of the Soviet Union. As we saw, he noted the drastic Cold-War division of the world into East and West. Like Nazi Germany, that (Soviet) East is also a colonial empire. Miłosz calls it an “Eastern Empire” and an “Imperium” (xii, 129). The Empire is headquartered in Moscow; it is ruled by the Soviet Union, its colonial master; and the countries of Eastern Europe are its vassals (16, 18, 21). The Empire is not only a political Leviathan, but has evolved its own, distinctive culture — a “new civilization” (xv). And that civilization, asserts Miłosz, is “infinitely strange” (xv). Its strangest aspect is the very focus of Miłosz's book — the subjectivity of its colonized subjects.

One dimension of that subjectivity, as Miłosz sees it, is the nationalist hatred of Russia and the Soviet Union, perduring since before World War II. Thus, it engulfed post-War Poland. The Soviet Union's reduction of the country to its puppet inflamed a pervasive, nationalist, anti-Soviet and anti-Russian hatred (125–26, 164–65, 245). But beyond Poland, argues Miłosz, nationalist Russophobia infects the whole of Eastern Europe (245). And it goes along with a sense of superiority. The region's post-War intellectuals think of Russia as a land of barbarism — “a nation which is still wild and primitive” (19). In fact, claims Miłosz, this view of Russia as barbaric is spread widely among the population of post-War Eastern Europe (61–62).<sup>4</sup>

To paint in further detail the strange subjectivity of Eastern Europeans, Miłosz borrows paintbrushes from a fellow artist. He refers to the novel *Insatiability* by the Polish avant-garde writer Stanislaw Witkiewicz (1996). Written in 1927 and set in Poland, the novel is a dystopia of the Europe of its time. Poland, to use Ezra Pound's language, has

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<sup>3</sup> The image of Eastern Europe as a colony victimized by Nazi Germany and by the Soviet Union during World War II appears in Miłosz's other writings as well. It does so in two autobiographical essays: “The Peace Boundary” (2010, 41) and “The G.G.” (2010, 42–45).

<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of Miłosz's own views on Russian culture, see Bill 2015. For an analysis of Miłosz's views on the Russian language, see Khairov 2014, 741–45.

become a “botched” society (2012, 323). Political power in the country is in the hands of an inscrutable general. Religion has largely disappeared; industrialization, scientific management, and dehumanizing mechanization of work have swept in; driven by experimentation, art has turned incomprehensible; drugs are spreading; licentiousness is rampant. Fresh out of high school, the protagonist, Zip, becomes the lover of a man-eater of a princess, who drags him into a whirlwind of fiendish sex; then he falls in love with the ruling general’s mistress, who teases him insane but denies him intimacy; and then he marries a lovely, chaste girl, whom he strangles on their wedding night. Ultimately, he goes mad. Meanwhile, a massive menace looms over this rotten realm. A mighty, communist Chinese empire rules Asia, and has just conquered Russia. Its invincible army is set to overrun Poland. The country’s fate will be decided by one, all-or-nothing, battle. Ready to lead his troops for it, the mysterious general, shockingly, surrenders to the Chinese. China thus conquers Poland, and starts preparing to move West — to overwhelm the rest of Europe (Witkiewicz 1996).

As it is advancing on Poland, China is bringing an odd ally. That ally is an Eastern religion that assaults the human mind. The religion is founded by a Malayan named Murti Bing, and its missionaries have descended on Poland hunting for converts. They carry a magical helper: a hallucinogenic drug, concocted by Chinese chemists, which makes the mind receptive to their religion (434–35). The religion “prepare[s] the way for [China’s] unstoppable conquest” (465). Its ideas are inane: it posits some sort of mystical “Maximal Oneness” of Being; but, overall, it is “claptrap” (453, 461). Its effect, however, is momentous. Aided by its drug, the religion erases the “personality” of its followers — their “ego,” their individual self — and makes them ready to embrace “any” “tyranny” (434). It turns them into de-individualized, docile sheep. But the sheep are happy. A convert to Murtibingism, explains Miłosz, “became serene and happy. The problems he had struggled with until then suddenly appeared to be superficial and unimportant. He smiled indulgently at those who continued to worry about them. [...] He no longer considered the approach of the [Chinese] army as a tragedy for his own civilization” (2001, 4–5).

Witkiewicz’s Murtibingism is epicentral to *The Captive Mind*. At the very outset of his book, in what is thus his originary premise, Miłosz claims that early-1950s Eastern Europe is a copy of Witkiewicz’s dystopian world. It has been overwhelmed by a new Murtibingism. Eastern Europeans have been converted to it *en masse* (5–6). Miłosz calls their religion a “New Faith,” and, as in Witkiewicz’s novel, it comes from the East (xiii). The East is now the Soviet Union, and the New Faith, which Miłosz also calls “the Method,” and “Diamat,” is “dialectical materialism as interpreted by Lenin and Stalin” (xii–xiii). As Miłosz represents it, Diamat has brainwashed Eastern Europeans into sheephood.



The New Faith is the life force of the Soviet, Eastern Empire. The Empire's entire edifice, claims Miłosz, is built on "rule over men's minds," on "mastery over the mind" (161, 197). This mind control is achieved through a relentless education, through educational institutions, art, the mass media — into dialectical materialism (197). The mind is captured, and its prison is Diamat. And Diamat is a hyper-rational system of ideas. It is a "total rationalism" (215). In an act of supreme hubris, Diamat attempts to fit reality into its concepts, and ignores, and forces people to ignore, those aspects of the world around us that do not conform to it. In this way, it colonizes the whole of reality conceptually (48–50). The same goes for the past. History is "presented as governed by unshakeable and already known laws" (199). It is simplified, "reduced" — degraded — to "a few [Diamat] formulas" (201).

Implementing this total control, however, is, for Miłosz, a *causa perdata*. For him, humans are a mystery. We have "imponderable," "mysterious," "irrational" impulses — which reason can never satisfy (201, 205–207).<sup>5</sup> One is a yearning for "happiness;" another is an "internal longing" for beauty; a third is a need for religion (6, 68, 205–207). All of these urges pose a "threat" to the Eastern Imperium's Diamatization of life (205). Hence, the Imperium organizes public ceremonies and rituals — surrogate religious rites — designed to satisfy the secret inner needs of its subjects. Stamped by Diamat, the culture that it fosters — its cinema, its art — is also intended to address those needs (197–99, 201, 207). In this way, the Eastern Empire is a new species of church (207).

This, as Miłosz sees it, is the *modus operandi* of the Eastern Empire's power. More conventionally, what he describes is a harsh, *highly ideological* political regime, which has been established in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and which is indoctrinating the people it rules into submission to itself.<sup>6</sup> What is important for us is the character of the Cold War's Eastern Bloc. Miłosz represents it in terms of colonialism, of imperialism, and of what Edward Said called "Orientalism" — a powerful, longstanding cultural and political "discourse," developed by the West since the eighteenth century, and seeking to understand, to define, and to dominate the Middle East and Asia. Christening those parts of the globe "the Orient," the West represented them negatively — as slothful, irrational, sensual, uncreative, intellectually barren, unchangeable, dangerous. In the eyes of the West, "the Orient" was a bad place (Said 1994a, 1994b).

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<sup>5</sup> Incidentally, Miłosz's contemporary Witold Gombrowicz has called the idea that humans are a mystery a "commonplace" (1985, 110).

<sup>6</sup> In this way, Miłosz's representation of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe is similar to Arendt's conceptualization of "totalitarianism," in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which was first published in the same years as *The Captive Mind*. In *Origins*, as is well known, Arendt argued that totalitarianism was a historically new political regime, unprecedentedly oppressive and brutal, which appeared in Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union. As she understood it, this regime was intensely ideological — saturated with ideology (1994).

Under Miłosz's pen, the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe are rendered in those terms — of colonialism, of imperialism, and of Orientalism. They are an empire. The Soviet Union has colonized Eastern Europe, territorially, politically, and mentally — subjugating the subjectivity of its subjects to its reigning dogma. By deploying Witkiewicz in his representation of it, Miłosz implies that the Soviet Empire is a manifestly Asian one, the Soviet Union resembling a menacing, predatory China, bent on vanquishing Europe. The Empire's ruling dogma, Diamat, resembles a sham Asian religion drugging its followers into brainlessness. Miłosz represents the East as a formidable menace, predatory, ruthless, enthralling Eastern Europe's mind. That East, as per Said, is a destructive, evil Orient. In *The Captive Mind*, Eastern Europe has been Orientalized. The Orient has colonized it, and through its new religion, it has brainwashed it into stupidity.

The intertextuality between Miłosz and Witkiewicz does accentuate *The Captive Mind's* resonance with Orientalism. For *Insatiability* is an Orientalist text. It represents China as a rebarbative Other. Its fictional Poland is infected with widespread anti-Chinese prejudice and racism. The Polish press describes the approaching Chinese armies as an onrushing “yellow wall” (Witkiewicz 1996, 477). Threatened by them, Poles think of them as subhuman “Yellows” — creatures of a lower race (458). The characters are similarly minded. The symbol of art in the novel, a composer of incomprehensible music, uses the racist epithet of “yellow monkey” (198). So too does Zip's lover, the lascivious princess; she also names China's looming conquest of Europe “the yellow flood,” and is worried about “the end of the white race” (290). Despite her racist anxiety, she thinks that the Chinese “lag behind in the evolutionary process” (188). Also thinking about the Chinese, Poland's military ruler thinks of them as “yellow conquerors” (170). He imagines them as “skulls fashioned from bone, with [...] shifty, slanted eyes” — eyes that look “villainous;” in his mind, the commander of the Chinese armies is a “Chink” (317, 518). Even the protagonist, Zip, who is relatively free of anti-Chinese prejudice, regards the oncoming Chinese as “petrified masses [who] have set out from the East” (62).<sup>7</sup>

Witkiewicz's narrator re-iterates this kind of Orientalist lingo. He terms China “possibly the greatest danger to our dull planet today” (56). In his eyes, the Chinese are “inscrutable;” they tend to be identical — “as like as peas in a pod;” they are short: the narrator calls their army's chief of staff a “homunculus” (496, 510, 517). That same general smells “like a corpse,” and so too do other Chinese military men (522). To the narrator's taste, Chinese food is disgusting. Upon his surrender to the Chinese, Poland's ruling general has a sumptuous lunch with China's supreme military commander. The food includes: “swallows' nests dipped in a sauce of pressed cockroaches,” and “rats' tails in a sauce of bedbugs stewed in tomatoes.” “Vile stuff,” jeers the narrator (515, 519). The color yellow stands out on his palette. He labels China, as it looms on the West's Eastern

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<sup>7</sup> For a history of Western perceptions of China, see Spence 1999.

horizon, “the yellow mass beyond the Urals” (108). Echoing his characters, he calls the Chinese “yellow devils” (114). This is how he describes China’s approach toward Europe: “The mobile Chinese Wall was looming larger and more awesome, casting an ominous yellow shadow over [...] the West” (40).<sup>8</sup>

Witkiewicz also sexualizes the Orient. His narrator depicts the Chinese as knights of lust. Their chief of staff has a “furious passion for white women of quality” (498). In general, *Insatiability* portrays the Orient as the embodiment of sex. This image emerges most powerfully in the portrayal of the protagonist’s paramour, the princess. Her aristocratic name is Princess di Ticonderoga; despite her name’s Italian acoustics, her family is Russian, having given up their Russian name and adopted an Italian one (110–111). Her own personal name is quintessentially Russian: Irina Vsevolodovna. She is the symbol of sexuality in the novel. She is a “nymphomaniac;” at one point, Zip thinks that she is “the most prominent whore in the land” (200, 414). And her sexuality is Oriental. Zip sees her as an Oriental princess. In his eyes, she has “a touch of grandeur about her[self], like the breath of the Mongolian steppe, whence her ancestors, the descendants of Genghis Khan, had come” (163). Her bedroom looks to him like a temple of lewdness. Among its paraphernalia are “albums filled with the most crude [*sic*] pornography, ranging from ordinary photographs to the subtle drawings of Chinese and Japanese woodcuts” (126). Naked in her bedroom, she “personifie[s],” for Zip, “hideous oriental myths and lewd sexual rites” (127). She, in turn, thinks of him as “her young ‘pasha” (382). The two of them are two Oriental avatars of lust.<sup>9</sup>

From today’s perspective, *Insatiability* is, thus, an Orientalist text. Witkiewicz represents China and Asia as a hateful Eastern Other. For his part, Miłosz softens Witkiewicz’s caustic Orientalism. Yet, the intertextuality between their works anchors *The Captive Mind* into the Western discourse of Orientalism. In Miłosz’s book, too, the East — a fusion between the Soviet Union, China, and Asia — is portrayed as a dark menace, an aggressive, predatory force that conquers Eastern Europe, and captures and wrecks its mind. Miłosz tranquilizes Witkiewicz’s Orientalism, but his own East is an East that is predatory and deeply corrupting. His is a second-hand Orientalism, but it is still an Orientalism.

Indeed, Miłosz stirs his Orientalism up in a key theme of his work: a possible escape from Eastern Europe’s mental prison. That jail has thick walls: though impossible to implement fully, the Eastern Empire’s “total rationalism” has been imposed very much successfully, making life there pretty “unbearable” (Miłosz 2001, 215). There is, however,

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<sup>8</sup> A part of that menace is China’s allied religion — Murtibingism. As we noted, the narrator thinks it trashy. But he also sees its missionaries likewise. One of them is “a young Hindu” (413). The narrator presents this man as obnoxious. He is “foul-smelling,” “stinking,” “[h]is mouth reek[ing] of rotten meat and damp moss” (413–15). The Murtibingists are, thus, represented as odious Orientals.

<sup>9</sup> The fusion of Russia and the Orient in the image of the princess foreshadows Miłosz’s transformation of the Soviet Union into an imperialist East.

a way out. Or, rather, a way in. It consists of an inward flight into the invisible recesses of one's own mind, where one locks up one's political dissidence, and pretends outwardly, in everyday life and reality, that one is a faithful believer in Diamat. One has a secret — an opposition to Diamat — but on the surface one is a soldier of the New Faith (54–61). This dissident psychology, claims Miłosz, is widespread in Eastern Europe: life there has become a “mass play,” “a constant and universal masquerade” (55–56). People have become “cunning” “actors” (54, 56). Shakespeare's “All the world's a stage” has been realized eerily (2008, 150–52).

To explain this inner acrobatics, however, Miłosz does not rely on Shakespeare. He turns to none other than Arthur Gobineau — the avatar of European racism, and, according to Said, one of the architects of Western Orientalism (1994a, 99). More specifically, Miłosz refers to Gobineau's 1865 book *Religions and Philosophies of Central Asia*.<sup>10</sup> In this work, as Miłosz sees it, Gobineau revealed a “permanent institution” in the Islamic Middle East. It was called “Ketman” (Miłosz 2001, 57). Quoting from *Religions and Philosophies* copiously, Miłosz explains that Ketman consists of hiding totally one's sincere Islamic faith from non-Muslims, burying it into one's mind utterly beyond access to the unbelievers. It also consists, if one happens to hold *unorthodox* Islamic beliefs, of concealing them equally totally from non-Muslims and orthodox Muslims alike. Even shameless lying is justified in protecting one's true religious beliefs (57–61). If one is suspected of harboring heterodoxy, wrote Gobineau as quoted by Miłosz, “Not only must one deny one's true opinion, but one is commanded [by Ketman] to resort to all ruses in order to deceive one's adversary. One makes all the protestations of faith that can please him, one performs all the rites one recognized to be the most vain, one falsifies one's own books, one exhausts all possible means of deceit” (as cited in Miłosz 2001, 57–58).<sup>11</sup>

Miłosz recognizes that Gobineau is a “rather dangerous writer” (2001, 57). And yet, he uses the notion of Ketman as a conceptual foil to understand his Eastern Europe. Ketman, he says, is a “striking analogy” to the pervasive “acting” in the region (57). Gobineau's idea of Ketman is a variation of a central trope of Orientalism: the notion that the Orient is mendacious — a realm of dishonesty (Said 1994a, 38–40, 286–87; Gobineau 2012, 113–22). By mobilizing it, Miłosz Orientalizes Eastern Europe. The region, he suggests, has been permeated by a new, surrogate-religious Ketman. True, that Ketman is a means of empowerment: its practice of a double subjectivity enables an escape from the New Faith.

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<sup>10</sup> For Gobineau's writings on “the Orient,” see Gobineau 2012. This book is a translation into English of extensive parts of two works by Gobineau: the 1859 *Three Years in Asia* and *Religions and Philosophies of Central Asia*. For a critique of Gobineau's views on “the Orient,” see Morrow 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Miłosz explains Gobineau's understanding of Ketman faithfully. For that understanding, see Gobineau 2012, 113–22. For a sagacious analysis of how Miłosz represents Ketman as a mental defense mechanism against Stalinist totalitarianism and of how it functioned as such in reality in the Soviet Bloc, see Walicki 1996, 489–94.

But at the same time, that concept reformulates and reaffirms the Orientalist trope of the Orient as dishonest. Corrupted radically by its own East, Miłosz's Eastern Europe, like the Orient of Orientalism, is a land of lies.

Miłosz's low-key Orientalism is, in fact, conjoined, in *The Captive Mind*, by a striking lack of sensitivity to otherness and to the history of Western colonialism. A major portion of the book, as we noted, examines four Polish literary figures and their embrace of the Eastern Europe of Diamat. In his analysis of Delta, Miłosz describes him as a man of "dark, gypsy coloring" (2001, 175). His wife, who is Georgian by origin, "ha[s] oriental features" (186). Miłosz, as we noted, acknowledges the "misdeeds of colonial politics." And yet, his book belies indifference to these sins. It mentions Joseph Conrad three times (83, 91, 98). And it describes him as a symbol of literary grandeur; his works emanate "majesty" and "a sense of the immensity of the inhuman, indifferent world" (83). This is not the Conrad whom Chinua Achebe famously called a "racist" (2010, 1618).<sup>12</sup> We also saw that Miłosz compares the experiences of Baltic exiles in the Soviet Union to those of a New Yorker in a Congo village. For him, that part of Africa symbolizes lack of civilization. But the Belgian Congo was the scene of one of the cruelest colonial regimes in the history of European imperialism. It horrified even cruel imperialist Europe (Hochschild 1998; Wesseling 2004, 165–69). More generally, Miłosz underestimates history. He refers to works of history as "the dry notes of historians" — incapable of bringing the past fully back to life (2001, 227). He also calls for a disengagement from the past. "Certainly," he writes, "worry over the fate of nations trampled down by History [...] leads nowhere, and is a proof of sentimentality. [...] The rage one feels [...] [at] the atrocities committed in America by Spanish Conquistadors is senseless. It cannot resurrect the Caribbean population slaughtered by Ponce de Leon [...]" (223). That resurrection is, unfortunately, indeed impossible. But sterilizing these horrors echoes the pathological thinking that spawned them.

In Miłosz's vision, then, its own Orient has debilitated Cold-War Eastern Europe — has wrecked its mind. But what about the other side — the Cold-War West? Miłosz's pessimism extends Westward as well.

Miłosz's contemporary West is capitalist, and capitalism, he claims, is not an edifying system. Its reality includes: "the charlatans of the stock exchange, feudal barons, self-deluding artists, and the instigators of nationalistic wars" (17). Greed, the West's life force, "has become a motive power second to none in its brutality" (23). Western society is oppressive in its own way: it forces the individual to "conform" to itself (xv). Unlike the Eastern Bloc, where the state has become a patron of intellectuals, Western society does

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<sup>12</sup> In his work of the 1950s, Miłosz also argued that Conrad's works reflect the political outlook of the Polish nobility, which included ambivalence toward the West and toward Russia. For an analysis of Miłosz's analysis of these views of Conrad, see Dudek 2014.

not look after them at all. It treats them with “indifference,” “which in practice amounts to polite cruelty.” The result is a huge waste of talent (39).

No wonder, then, that Eastern Europe’s intellectuals see the West as similar to the sick society of Witkiewicz (15). Still, for Miłosz, the West has redeeming qualities. These include: the rule of law; a significant material prosperity for the vast majority of its people; a massive manufacturing capacity; great technological progress; advanced mechanization of work (28, 31–33, 35). These successes, however, do not enchant Eastern Europeans, claims Miłosz. For them, socialism, not capitalism, is a better social order (39–40). They do cherish a hope vis-à-vis the West, but it concerns matters of the spirit. Imprisoned mentally by Diamat, they look, in the West, for “some sign that real cultural values can arise outside the scope of the Method” — values that are “lasting” and “geared to the future” (40). Eastern Europe, in other words, hopes to find in the West the inklings of a better future culture, of a future, higher human spirit. But, as Miłosz notes, these gems are exceedingly hard to find (37, 40–41). In fact, Miłosz does not reveal such a gem. His West is thus a disappointment of Eastern Europe’s hope for a brighter future.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. *Any Hopes for the Future?*

As both the East and the West are disillusionments for Eastern Europe, is there no way out of their desert of hopelessness for it? Against the odds, Miłosz intimates such hopes. These are, in fact, not only hopes for Eastern Europe, but universal ones — implying ways of overcoming mental and political oppression as such. So, what are these hopes?

One is revealed in a tragic image. The image is related to a shattering experience that Miłosz had during World War II — witnessing the obliteration of the Warsaw Jewish ghetto by the Nazis, in 1943, in retaliation for its uprising against the Holocaust. It is the image of a beautiful young Jewish woman, in the prime of her life, who was shot before Miłosz’s eyes, as she was trying to escape from the dying ghetto. The image of her demise, confesses Miłosz, has haunted him since then, and it appears in his mind every time he contemplates beautiful women now, in his post-War life. At those moments, Miłosz is attracted to these women; they also make him feel joy at “being alive amidst living human beings” (184). At those special moments, the image of the dead woman blends with the real women he sees — into one vision. Miłosz is attracted to that vision erotically (184–85). This desire, he remarks, “belongs,” “perhaps,” “to the same sphere as do the collective sex orgies of some primitive tribes. At such times, this or another object of desire are the same, all women and men are fused by a great feeling of communion through which everyone belongs to all” (184). Significantly, this impulse, declares Miłosz, “is a profound basis for love of mankind” (185). As Miłosz sees it, human erotic love, which leads us to

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<sup>13</sup> For a comparative analysis of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s, Czesław Miłosz’s, and Milan Kundera’s ideas on the West, see Donahue 1983. Donahue, however, does not examine Miłosz’s extensive portrayal of the West in *The Captive Mind* — a serious lacuna in his analysis.

see human beings as one Being, can enable us to transcend divisions — between Self and Other, colonizer and colonized, East and West. It can enable us to create a unified humankind living in celebration of love and of life.

This escape from the bane of the East and of the West is not spatial. It is not located in the East, or in the West. It is temporal. It involves going back in time — returning to an ancient human condition of panhuman pansexuality. It has a spatiality, but an inward one. This is the spatiality of turning inward, toward the inner sanctum of human subjectivity, toward the elemental human impulse of erotic love.

A similar spatiality also defines a second way out of the bane of East and West that Miłosz suggests. That escape appears at the end — the most emphatic locus — of his book — in a description of another pivotal experience in his life. For Miłosz, this experience embodies the impetus behind his own defection to the West, his own break out of the captivity of Diamat (223, 246–51).

The experience has come to pass in the Ukraine, in a huge Soviet train station, at the start of World War II. The place is brimming with the hustle and bustle of a massive crowd of busy travelers, while loudspeakers are blasting propaganda. Walking through this hubbub, Miłosz suddenly sees a family of Polish peasants. They are huddled around their luggage, having tea and talking softly. A simple peasant family, at a simple moment in their life. To Miłosz, however, they mean the world. “I gazed at them,” he writes, “until I felt moved to the point of tears. What had stopped my steps so suddenly and touched me so profoundly was their *difference*. This was a human group, an island in a crowd that lacked something proper to humble, ordinary human life.” There is an elemental “humanity” in this “humble” family (249). Miłosz feels this humanity. He feels it in their ordinary gestures, in the kind attention of the parents to their children, in their conversation, and in their seclusion from the surrounding commotion (249). It is elusive, ineffable — “a mystery” (249).<sup>14</sup> This mystery is what makes the family different from the crowd around them — from a humankind moved — mobilized — by the maelstroms of history (249). It places them outside of history (249). Precisely this mystery of humanity, as he admits himself, inspired Miłosz to leave Eastern Europe and its New Faith for the West. Diamatized Eastern Europe, he admits, disregarded this mystery-humanity completely, and it could thus no longer be his home (223, 246–51). Significantly, this mystery exists beyond the grasp of the East and of the West. Embracing it contains a promise of escaping from the bane of both. This is, indeed, a promise of freedom from mental-political oppression *per se*.

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<sup>14</sup> Aleksander Fiut has argued, similarly, that, in his poetry, Miłosz suggests that humans’ humanity “can only be sensed, but not expressed [in words]” (1987, 68).

### 3. *Concluding Remarks: (Mis-)Representation, Hopelessness*

In the last paragraph of his book, Miłosz falls into a solemn reverie. It is Judgment Day, and he is standing before Zeus. At that ultimate moment, he makes a confession to his judge, the lord of Olympus: “you made me a poet,” he says, “and [...] you gave me the gift of seeing simultaneously what was happening in Omaha and Prague, in the Baltic states and on the shores of the Arctic Ocean. I felt that if I did not use that gift my poetry would be tasteless to me and fame detestable” (251). The implication is that, in *The Captive Mind*, Miłosz has tried to use his superior vision to understand his world. In the words of William Wordsworth, he has tried to “see into the life of things” (2011, 133). And, as behooves a poet, he has sought to tell the truth about that world.

While claiming omniscience, however, Miłosz’s vision of his world is rather moldy. He is probing the world of what Western intellectuals of the time called “totalitarianism,” and which they saw as historically unprecedented — as a historical novelty. Arendt famously called totalitarianism “a novel form of government” (1994, 460). Miłosz’s vision of the totalitarian world is behind its times: it is constructed in the conventional terms of colonialism and imperialism.<sup>15</sup> He sees Eastern Europe as a liminal colonial space, as a victim of Western and of Eastern imperialism. For him, 1950s Eastern Europe has been colonized by an imperious East — a colonialism so radical as to have incarcerated the region’s mind. Miłosz’s colonialist vision, moreover, is tinted with Orientalism. He represents Eastern Europe’s captivity of mind as an Orientalist prison. He shows even that mind’s inner break from its prison as an Orientalist escape.

Strikingly, Miłosz’s Orientalism echoes in his other writings, besides *The Captive Mind*. Thus, it appears in his 1967 essay, “Dictionary of Wilno Streets.” Reminiscing about his youth in Vilnius, Miłosz (1991, 15–16) admits that Henri Massis’s book, *Defence of the West*, which he read at that time, was a formative and lasting influence on his thinking. Written in 1927, *Defence* is a dirge for the West, as well as a call for its regeneration. Massis issues a dismal diagnosis: ravaged by World War I, Occidental civilization is in a state of decomposition. It confronts two grave threats: a fad, lately sprung in Germany, for the inane ideas and culture of Asia, and a socialist Soviet Union seeking to rally and lead Asia in its crusade against the capitalist world. Asia — the Orient — is thus a specter menacing the West. For Massis, the salvation of the West lies in a revival of Catholicism (1927).

In 1967, Massis is still a part of Miłosz. The “Dictionary” contains a momentous entry, a striking confession: “Who knows,” wonders Miłosz, “perhaps my distaste for the ‘wisdom of the East’ that is sweeping California” comes from Massis (1991, 16). The Eastern advent

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<sup>15</sup> Arendt also conceived European imperialism as a part of the history of totalitarianism. But, as she saw it, European imperialism *foreshadowed* totalitarianism. For her, totalitarianism was an emphatically new historical phenomenon, not, as in Miłosz, a repetition of imperialism (Arendt 1994).



that irritates Miłosz's taste is the love of Asian ideas and spirituality that ignited in the counterculture of the Beatniks and the hippies of the 1950s and 1960s, reverberating in American society at large (Goldberg 2010, 1–14, 130–209, 224–32, 266–68; Moretta 2017; Anderson 2018, 130–53). Miłosz is not *fully* sure whether his dislike for Asian thought stems specifically from Massis. But its pedigree aside, his antipathy, as he confesses, is *fully* real.

Spilling into his other works, Miłosz's Orientalism goes beyond *The Captive Mind* in an even further way. Tainted with Orientalism, *The Captive Mind* acquired a significant nexus to its historical context. While critical of the West, it became a part of the ideological conflict between the East and the West during the Cold War, joining that clash decidedly on the side of the West. Indeed, it is a landmark of the dissident literature of the Cold-War Eastern Bloc, celebrated in the West as a powerful critique of the Eastern Bloc. In this sense, it is similar to the concept of “totalitarianism,” which was used by the West as a weapon for demonizing the Soviet Union (Gleason 1995). What we see with *The Captive Mind* is that, joining the West's ideological assault on the Eastern Bloc, the book mobilized Orientalism in that offensive. There is really no irony in this mobilization, as both the West's ideological war against the Eastern Bloc and Orientalism were its own projects.

But what is also significant is Miłosz's ultimate hopelessness for the future. In *The Captive Mind*, his hopes for overcoming East and West and for freedom from mental-political oppression are doubtful. His love of humankind based on eroticism is a rather naïve vision. As of today, it has been discarded by history. It has never been realized in practice as a viable escape from any kind of oppression, either in Eastern Europe or anywhere else in the world. As in practice, it is no more plausible in theory. Even if moments of sexual ecstasy could give rise to the altruism that Miłosz envisions, would it be possible to build a society or a polity on that altruism? In *The Captive Mind*, Miłosz does not answer this vital question. Indeed, he does not even pose it.

Miłosz's mystery-based vision of freedom from mental-political oppression is also illusory. Seeing humans as a mystery inspired his own escape from Eastern Europe's mental prison. And it implies a profound respect for humans — even an awe at human beings. But again, history since 1953 has not realized this idea as a practical, workable, way of overcoming any kind of oppression anywhere on our planet. Miłosz's hope in mystery also subverts his very analysis of Eastern Europe's “captive mind.” Exalting that mystery is a gesture of mystification. It is a religious gesture. It encourages waiting for that mystery to turn into a miracle — a miracle that could lead to some kind of salvation. Ultimately, like religion, Miłosz thus urges us to believe in miracles.<sup>16</sup> But for a book that,

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<sup>16</sup> In *The Eternal Moment*, a now-classic in Miłosz scholarship, Fiut identifies two palpable strands in Miłosz's oeuvre: a “rationalistic,” “Western,” impulse in his non-fiction and a “mystical,” “Eastern,” one (influenced by “Russian religious thought”) in his poetry (1990, 83). In Fiut's terms, these two impulses get entangled in *The Captive Mind* — with mysticism damaging analysis.

to use the language of Frantz Fanon (2001), seeks to *analyze* the “wretched” subjectivity of Eastern Europe, sitting on miracles is a rather wretched denouement.

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