

## **THE CAPTIVE MIND** (CZESLAW MILOSZ)

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We all like to imagine ourselves as heroes. We watch movies, and we instinctively put ourselves in the place of the hero, not in the place of the villain. We read the histories of twentieth-century tyrannies, and we assume we would be the resistance fighter, not the collaborator, informer, or toady to the new archons. Maybe we would be heroes. But probably not, if history is any guide. Czeslaw Milosz's 1951 *The Captive Mind* explores, through the author's personal experience, what motivates seemingly morally strong, thoughtful men to instead cooperate with, and often embrace, evil. Sadly, this question is as relevant today as seventy years ago, which makes this book very much worth reading for its insights into the future, as well as into the past.

Milosz, a world-famous poet and winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1980, revolves most of his core analysis around the motivations of artists, usually artists of the word, presumably because that was his own milieu during World War II and afterwards. He was living in Warsaw, working in radio and writing well-received poems, participating in the active cultural life of the time, but not in politics to any significant degree (he seems throughout his life to have been neither Left nor Right, though tilting slightly left), when the Germans and the Russians invaded. It was the Germans who occupied Warsaw, and Milosz survived the war there, living largely underground and participating in mild subversive activities such as writing for forbidden newspapers, although he did not join the Home Army or fight in the Warsaw Uprising. But he saw firsthand all the horrors of the German occupation, and of the Uprising, and he returns to them again and again in this book, even though its main focus is the so-called people's democracies of the immediate postwar period. During that time, Milosz worked as a cultural attaché for the new Polish government put into power by the Russians. He never joined the Party, but was able to maintain this position because the Communists loved to tout their association with artists, and the Polish government, like the other countries captured by Stalin, had a few years in which it could pretend to not be fully under Stalin's thumb. But by 1951, Milosz had had enough of Communism, and fled

for Paris, then the United States, where he lived until 2000, when he moved home to Poland, dying in 2004.

This book is best read not as an attempt to precisely clarify and classify the natures of those who cooperated with and advanced Communism, but as a set of insights gained from people Miłosz knew as they interacted with history. (It is also profitably read in combination with Mark Lilla's very good *The Reckless Mind*, which nods to this book while expanding its analysis.) *The Captive Mind* focuses on intellectuals, specifically poets and other writers, because they were whom Miłosz knew most intimately. His book says nothing about other collaborators, such as those strictly out for personal gain, and it also says nothing about the working class, which is ignored as irrelevant, as indeed it always was under Communism. Instead, the book shows how mental gymnastics, rather than coercion, caused writers under Communism to adhere to Communism. Thereby, indirectly, it congratulates writers who believe their minds free from such, or other, contortions. It is perhaps no wonder, therefore, that this book was popular among Western writers of all political stripes.

Miłosz begins with a fable, taken from a Polish science fiction novel, about how a new Sino-Mongol Empire conquers Poland and, instead of terrorizing the bitter and unhappy population, satisfies them with "the pill of Murti-Bing," which ensures that each person is internally happy no matter his external circumstance. The pill makes reality, no matter how bad, bearable, even joyous. In the novel, this leads to general social satisfaction, except for some, who develop schizophrenia, unable to reconcile their inner character, their creative spark, with the false art that their chemically altered brains produce. Miłosz says that under Communist domination this vision "is being fulfilled in the minutest detail." (Presumably the schizophrenics are those who, like Miłosz, ultimately reject Communism entirely.) The West incorrectly sees "might and coercion" as the reasons those in Eastern Europe submit to Communism. But, rather, unwilling to face either physical or spiritual death, many choose instead to be "reborn" through taking these metaphorical pills, because "[t]here is an internal longing for harmony and happiness that lies deeper than ordinary fear or the desire to escape misery or physical destruction." Intellectuals, and artists especially, do not want to be "internal exiles, irreconcilable, non-participating,

eroded by hatred.” So they swallow the pills and adopt the “New Faith” (a term Milosz uses throughout the book) which offers the intellectual the certainty he is both correct and virtuous, and therefore gives him a sense of belonging, gives him a feeling of being “warm-hearted and good . . . a friend of mankind—not mankind as it is, but as it *should* be.”

The metaphor of Murti-Bing, forgotten for a few decades, is remembered today. Murti-Bing’s explanatory power for the behavior of modern intellectuals under modern ideological tyrannies seems universally applicable. It has been recently cogently used, for example, to explain how very many in the intellectual class of Americans, and Europeans, have accepted and embraced the totalitarian agenda aptly and accurately known as *globohomo*, a toxic mutating stew of neoliberal globalist corporatism and moral degeneracy, the reward for consuming which is being forced to consume more. (I am curious if Murti-Bing also explains the behavior of twenty-first-century Chinese artists, about whom I know little or nothing, although I suppose today the Chinese tyranny is less ideological and more nationalist.)

After an interesting chapter on how intellectuals in the new people’s democracies view America, Milosz returns to another concept for which he is remembered, that of Ketman. This is, we are told, a pleasurable psychological state obtained when one deceives those in power about one’s true motives and beliefs, while nonetheless strictly obeying the orders of those in power. It is described as extremely prevalent in nineteenth-century Islam, where heretical believers practiced Ketman. As a historical matter, I don’t know how true this is (Milosz ascribes knowledge of it to Arthur Gobineau, inventor of “scientific racism,” which does not lend confidence); it may just be a description of the Shiite practice of *taqiyya*. But that doesn’t matter for the metaphor.

In essence, one practicing Ketman is, to an outside observer, compliant with his rulers, yet he generally hopes for different, but similar, ends. Milosz describes several types of Ketman and suggests there are others, many and varied. For example, those practicing “national Ketman” praise Russia even though they have contempt for it; they still love Communism, though, just think it better done through their own nation. Those practicing “aesthetic Ketman” create lifeless socialist realist art on command, because otherwise they would be left with nothing, no property and no position in society, yet in private use

their position to surround themselves with real art. Those practicing the “Ketman of revolutionary purity” believe that Stalin betrayed the Revolution, yet only through him can the Revolution now be realized, so they must do as he says. In all cases, the basic point is the same—Ketman is a form of doublethink, in which people toe the Communist line, making no waves and rocking no boats, and trying to avoid reifying the contradictions. The man practicing Ketman suffers, yet he would suffer more if Communism disappeared, since he defines himself in this way. “Internal revolt is sometimes essential to spiritual health, and can create a particular form of happiness. . . . Ketman brings comfort, fostering dreams of what might be, and even the enclosing fence affords the solace of reverie.”

On the surface, Ketman seems similar to Ernst Jünger’s concepts of the forest rebel and the anarchist, someone who keeps his mind free from the rulers while largely adhering to their commands. But in fact the concepts are very different, for Ketman is a form of self-delusion, something that Jünger absolutely forbids. Ketman instead sinks deep into the soul of the practitioner, making, for example, the men Milosz profiles later in the book convinced that they freely chose to adhere to Communism. They become unable to say who is their true self. Ultimately, Ketman is a poison.

What ties Murti-Bing and Ketman together is that those under the power of either are not truly unhappy or oppressed, at least subjectively. Moreover, both seem to be confined largely to intellectuals, those who care both about ideas and their position in society. Rod Dreher, for example, has pointed out how common both are among today’s so-called conservative writers; the entire staff of *National Review*, to the extent it is actually conservative, is probably practicing Ketman and washing down Murti-Bing pills with vodka, in between grifting money out of elderly donors, the whole staff pretty happy on balance. It’s not just conservative intellectuals, though. Intellectuals on the Left, faced with the dominance of globohomo, may think the frenzy for conformity to insane ideas like identity politics, intersectionality, gender fluidity and the like has gone too far, and damages their core concerns, such as those about economic inequality. They join the chorus, yet still hope that the stupidity will burn itself out and allow their goals to again surface, meanwhile getting a frisson of pleasure from the camaraderie of

joining the latest Two-Minute Hate against some Christian pizza parlor. On the other hand, a social conservative working at a big corporation, crushed by woke capitalism and forced to wear a “Pride” pin to show his “allyship” on pain of losing his job, is just oppressed and unhappy. Since he has no ideological goal himself, he cannot practice Ketman, and he does not want to be a friend of abstract mankind, merely provide for his family and to lead a decent life, so the pills of Murti-Bing also have no effect on him.

Milosz then profiles, under pseudonyms, four men well known to him who bowed to Communism, analyzing why in each case. (He ignores those who, like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, did not bow.) Alpha, the Moralist. Beta, the Disappointed Lover. Gamma, the Slave of History. Delta, the Troubadour. Who these men were is easy to determine. Originally, I thought that of no importance, and anyway I can’t pronounce Polish names, so I figured I’d go with the pseudonyms entirely. But it turns out that to some degree who they were, and their later history, matter, and Alpha is the best example of this.

Alpha was Jerzy Andrzejewski, a prose writer. In Milosz’s telling, he had a “tragic sense of the world,” drawn to Joseph Conrad’s novels, with their moral conflicts and dense storytelling. Before the war, he received laudation for short stories that featured archetypal characters, black-and-white, with a Catholic focus. He, however, realized that he did not really deserve the laudation, since his stories were simplistic morality tales, lacking nuance—yet he was eager to be regarded as the best writer in Poland. During the war, as their friends disappeared, often shot by the Germans, Alpha became regarded as a moral authority within the Warsaw community of writers, among other things speaking out against the slaughter of the Jews, and he and Milosz lived through the Uprising together, something Milosz spends some time describing. Alpha’s morality was not that of Christ, despite his putative Catholicism, but rather a belief in a largely abstracted loyalty, generically to the Polish people.

After the Uprising, he rejected his old belief in loyalty, seeing it led to nothing but death, instead coming to believe that History had an arc and that social goals should be the focus. His new morality fit well with the new Communist regime, eager to have artists under its wing to “bridge the gap” between the tiny number of Communists in Poland and the rest of the population—and Alpha was well known for his devotion

to Poland. The Communists gave him a new moral frame, and praised him to the skies, and he published an excellent novel, though one, again, with archetypical characters divorced from real human experience, and established himself, as he desired, as a writer of the first rank. Within a few years, however, as the Communist Party tightened its grip, Alpha, like all other artists, was required to make a choice—join the Party and create tightly defined social realist art, or be cast into the outer darkness. Alpha, without hesitation, joined the New Faith. He became a Soviet propagandist, referred to by his old friends as “the respectable prostitute.” He still had a moral frame; it was merely different. Miłosz is dispassionate about this apparent end. “It is not my place to judge. I myself traveled the same road of seeming inevitability.”

Alpha is clearly drawn. But he is incomplete, because Andrzejewski stepped off the path that he was on in 1951. In 1956 he quit the party, and in the 1970s and 1980s he was a strong supporter of anti-Communist movements, dying in 1983. So, in the end, he partially redeemed himself. What this says about Miłosz’s thesis we will consider later.

Next is Beta, in real life a man named Tadeusz Borowski. He was another writer, a young man with nihilist tendencies. Arrested by the Germans, he survived two years in Auschwitz, then Dachau. After the war, he wrote a book in which he celebrated his cleverness at surviving by working the system and being an accessory to various evils in the camps. In Miłosz’s analysis, Beta is not amoral; instead, he has a disappointed love of the world and of humanity. He is unable to see any nobility in humanity, even when in front of his eyes, as it was at times in the camps. Rather, he became full of hatred, and the Communists, again collecting artists, convinced him to use that hatred in their service, by convincing him the eschaton was upon us, earthly salvation from the evils Beta saw everywhere. The price was that he could only write socialist realism, with stock Communist heroes and their evil enemies, divorced of the raw human emotions and perception of universal human degradation that had featured in his writing before. By choice, therefore, he reduced himself to writing undistinguished and indistinguishable political propaganda rants. Perhaps, like some of the takers of the original pill of Murti-Bing, he realized the contradiction, so, in 1951, a few days after his first child was born, he killed himself, by gas, at age twenty-eight.

Third is Gamma, who long before the war was a convinced Communist. He fled to Russia during the war, and returned in the train of the conquering Red Army, in which he was a political commissar. He was given great power over other Polish writers, and he enjoyed it. In Milosz's analysis, "he considered himself a servant of the devil that ruled History, but did not love his master." Yet he never wavered from his choice. "But sometimes he is haunted by the thought that the devil to whom men sell their souls owes his might to men themselves, and that the determinism of History is a creation of human brains." And fourth is Delta, a writer who only wanted to amuse under the eyes of the adoring multitude, and under Communism, could only do so by toeing the Communist line—just as he had always toed whatever line was in power at the moment.

These sketches are compelling and provide a lot of food for thought. They do not provide simple answers. What strikes the reader most of all, other than the applicability of the same concepts to any ideological tyranny, not just Communism, is that the feeling that pervades this book, more so than any other emotion, is resignation. Milosz, like many other anti-Communists of the 1950s, saw the conquests of Communism as effectively permanent. He was, perhaps, less pessimistic than others, such as Whittaker Chambers, who saw future global triumph of Communism as inevitable, and believed he had joined the losing side. But Milosz did not seem to see any non-Communist future for the conquered nations of Europe.

Thus, Milosz tells us that those who say "a change must come, this can't go on" merely hold "an amusing belief in the natural order of things." However, Milosz implies, there is no such natural order. "The man of the East cannot take Americans seriously because they have never undergone the experiences that teach men how relative their judgments and thinking habits are. . . . Because they were born and raised in a given social order and in a given system of values, they believe that any other order must be 'unnatural,' and that it cannot last because it is incompatible with human nature. But even they may one day know fire, hunger, and the sword." This connects to a related, half-contradictory theme that runs throughout the book: how what seems like the permanent natural order can so swiftly change for the worse. Milosz returns again and again to the horrors the Germans wrought; it is no

more natural, “if both are within the realm of one’s experience,” for a man to go about his daily life in the bustling city of Warsaw than it is for him to live underground eating rats in the destroyed city of Warsaw. Combining these themes together suggests a deep pessimism on Miłosz’s part, a view that ideology was leading history to be a one-way ratchet ending in total ideological tyranny.

But, of course, Miłosz was wrong. Communism lasted only thirty-five years more—thirty-five long years, to be sure, but in retrospect the cracks were growing within early in that time. Miłosz, however, could not see them, nor could nearly anyone else. He could not see that, within a few short years, Alpha would reject Communism, and perhaps Beta or Delta would have too, had they not died young. Why is that? Why do modern ideologies that gain power seem to implant defeatism in the minds of the righteous?

This has been much on my mind recently, since for post-liberals, it’s important that we evaluate how we get to “post,” and what that looks like. Most of the wealthy portions of the West are, of course, currently in the grip of a totalitarian ideology—a new religion, a combination of neoliberal, corporatist extraction economics, the erasing of the West’s culture and cultures, and ever-nastier moral degeneracy, collectively enforced with an iron hand by our ruling classes, who control all the levers of power. It seems inevitable that this headlong flight from reality, with its fractalized manifestations, from the mendacious falsification of history in the *New York Times*’s “1619 Project,” to the physical and mental mutilation of children to advance insane transgender ideology, to funding mindless blinding consumerism with Chinese debt and pumping up the money supply, is going to be ultimately caught and thrashed by reality. Yet most post-liberals, and in general most people of good faith, like Alpha, Gamma, and Delta, find themselves viscerally unable to believe in a clean future with renewed human flourishing, and either despair or conform. At most, we who see clearly adopt a waiting stance, half-bored and barely flinching at the latest outrage imposed on the righteous.

I think this is an error, or a partial error. True, direct action against globohomo is generally useless, though participating in holding actions such as electing men who throw sand in the gears is both amusing and somewhat profitable. But history always provides an axis, a point



around which it turns, a point of weakness of the now-existing and then-passing order, which cannot be predicted with specificity and is often only obvious in retrospect. Rather than simply waiting, we should be preparing to, when the opportunity presents itself, pour our fire upon that axis, at its moment of appearance and exposure. For that, three things are necessary: friends (as Bronze Age Pervert often says), resources (intellectual, monetary, and military, all preferably shielded as much as possible from attack), and will. Milosz erred by not seeing that the end of Communism was, even in 1951, within sight. But he nonetheless lived to see it, and though what Europe got afterwards has not turned out much better, maybe the second time will be a charm, both here and across the ocean.