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Jan Skácel and Adam Zagajewski: The Czech and the Polish Poet on the Civilization and the Barbarians

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The Czech and the Polish Poet on the Civilization
and the Barbarians**

Edward Said observes in his classical study *Orientalism* (1978) that “the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience.” (Said, 2003: 1-2). The relation the West has entertained with the Eastern part of Europe is in many ways analogous to the colonial perspective applied to the Orient (as was convincingly demonstrated by Said). In a comparable manner, the East has thus been defined by the West in a negative way: The East is what is NOT the West. East-Central Europe has always been regarded by Western intellectuals and writers as something between the West and the Orient, a transitory and ambiguous space, the homeland of the barbarians from the Classical times. Therefore, we suggest reflecting on the striking discrepancy between the Western idea of the civilization of Eastern Europe and the way East European poets tend to understand themselves. Indeed, we will show how in the poems of Adam Zagajewski (born in 1945) and Jan Skácel (1922-1989) the identification with the classical Western civilization and culture is one of its major defining elements. The Antiquity and classical culture seem to represent for both poets a major aspect of their own bonding with the civilization of the West. We will focus especially on their creation of the 1980s, last years of Skácel’s life and also the last years of the totalitarian regime in Eastern Europe when the East-West division was still a tangible, everyday reality and in Zagajewski’s case also on his texts written in the 1990s that very

well reflect the post-communist transformation of the Eastern part of Europe and the new challenges it brings along.

We will start by going back to the original sense of the word “barbaric” or “barbarian.” The Latin word *barbarus* was originally used to designate all other peoples and tribes than the Greeks or the Romans, those who did not share the values of the classical civilization. This South-North division typical of the Classical times (the civilized South and the barbaric North) was perpetuated in the Renaissance time Italy whose representatives were seeing themselves as the heirs of the classical civilization (Wolff 5).

By extension, the word *barbarus* was later used to label the “foreigners,” those who are different to “us.” This use clearly shows the intention behind it: to strengthen one’s own identity by contrasting one’s own civilization with the bizarre otherness of the foreigner. (Only later had the word acquired the negative connotation of “uncultivated,” “cruel” or “rogue.”) It is hence interesting to study the role the classical culture plays in the works of Central and East European authors, those who have been constantly linked by their Western counterparts to the barbaric North-East of Europe.

In his book entitled *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, Larry Wolff argues that the image of Eastern Europe was to a large extent coined during the 18th century and was much more based on fantasies than on real knowledge of the region. During this period, the South-North division was gradually being replaced by a new, West-East division (with new emerging industrial and cultural centers in the North—Paris, London or Amsterdam). It is also in the 18th century that the word “civilization” enters, as a neologism, English and French dictionaries. Indeed, Wolff argues that it was in contrast to the Eastern part of Europe that the West succeeded in defining the term of “civilization”—by contrasting it to the barbaric, under-developed manners of the Eastern margins of the continent:

It was Western Europe that invented Eastern Europe as its complementary other half in the eighteenth century, the age of Enlightenment. It was also the Enlightenment with its intellectual centres in Western Europe, that cultivated and appropriated to itself the new notion of “civilization,” an eighteenth-century neologism, and civilization discovered its complement, within the same continent, in shadowed lands of backwardness, even barbarism. (Wolff 4)

Undeniably, many of the important figures of the 18th century Western Enlightenment, be it Voltaire, Rousseau or Herder, wrote major and vastly influential texts on Eastern Europe and its inhabitants without extensively travelling through the region. As Wolff reminds us, Voltaire's most exotic travel was from Paris to Berlin, Herder certainly spent several years among the German community of Riga and visited also other parts of the Russian Empire of that time but on his travel from Riga to France he did not go through Poland but chose rather to sail through the Baltic Sea. Nevertheless, in spite of the lack of real knowledge of the region, the image of Eastern Europe presented by these intellectual authorities of their time largely prevails up to these days in the Western commonly shared knowledge on Eastern Europe. Thus, for Voltaire and his successors, as claims Wolff, "scarcely known" Eastern part of the European continent simply meant "less civilized" (Wolff 91). Later on, other Western eminent intellectuals perpetuated this stereotypical image of Eastern Europe. Thus, after his well-known trip to Poland in 1790, the great Goethe summed up his experience in a letter to Herder in these words: "In these eight days I have seen much that is remarkable, even if it has been for the most part only remarkably negative." (Wolff 333). Fichte made a month-long trip to Poland, a year after Goethe. In Silesia, he saw: "villages worse than the Saxon ones, that already appear very Polish" (Wolff 333) and this is how Fichte comments on his crossing of the Prussian-Polish border: "The first village is Ponikowo, German, but a shudder came over me, especially at the sight of the large dogs running freely around . . . The dress of the peasants takes on here already in the first village something wild and neglected." (Wolff 334).

Let us now contrast this very clear-cut image of the barbaric East with the notion of civilization expressed in the poetry of East-European artists themselves. Jan Skácel (1922-1989) is a well-known Czech poet (who significantly influenced a whole generation of young Czech poets of the 1990s) and also, in the 1960s (1964-1969), the editor-in-chief of an important literary journal in Czechoslovakia, *Host do domu* (*A Guest to the House*). For this journal, he developed a special column, entitled "Little reviews" ("Malé recenze"). In these witty, warm and charming poetic texts, he was regularly commenting on topical issues of his time but also on general existential

problems of human existence. It is difficult to find in the gentle texts of this poet the word “barbarian” or “barbaric.” We succeeded in finding the word in an introductory text to a collection of poetry of one of his friends, the poet Oldřich Mikulášek (1910-1985), *Svlékání hadů* (*Serpents’ Sloughing of Skin*), dating back to 1963.

In this text Skácel remembers a dialogue he apparently once had with an old man of his region, the Southern Moravia. Not very well known outside the Czech Republic, this is a region famous for its mild climate, the indigenous folklore (still very much alive) and the local wine. Most of the people living in the countryside would have at least a small vineyard and make their own wine, which they would feel particularly proud of:

Znával jsem staříčka, který byl chytřejší než já. Jednou mne učil pít víno. Říkal: nejprve se podívej skrz pohárek na slunce, abys měl radost z barvy. Potom přivoň kvůli tomu bukétu. Pak si přitukni a podrž skleničku u ucha. Uslyšíš potopené zvony. No a potom – nepij. To už nestojí za to. To nech barbarům.¹ (Jan Skácel, 1963, qtd. in Kožmín 99)

This tender and humoresque division line that is drawn between the civilized world and the territory of barbarians will serve us as a guiding line for our study. Transcending the simply comical effect, Skácel’s story indicates a certain concept of culture and civilization. It is interesting to note that the bordering region of Southern Moravia was the only one in the Czech lands that had certain (though limited) contacts with the Roman Empire whose northern frontiers collided with this region. References to classical Greek and Roman culture are frequent in Skácel’s poetry and they even increase at the end of his life and we would thus like to explore their general significance within poets work.

¹ “I used to know this old man, who was smarter than me. On one occasion, he was teaching me how to drink wine. He was saying: first, look at the sun through the cup, so that you would feel the joy from the color. Then smell it for the bouquet. Then clink glasses and put the cup to your ear. You’ll hear bells sunk under water. And then—do not drink. That is no longer worth it. Leave that to barbarians.” (Trans. Petra James)

The interest in classical plays and the figure of Oedipus

The interest in classical texts is no chance in Skácel's works. Apart from being a poet and a journalist, he also wrote several adaptations of classical texts for theatre. He is, among other, the author of a Czech adaptation of Plautus' play *Pseudolus* and Sophocles' *Oedipus*. The figure of Oedipus seems to be particularly important for the poet and he was regularly returning to the text of *Oedipus* since the 1970s till his late years. His interest in this particular classical tragedy, though universal, can be better understood if we take into account the conditions of Skácel's life during that period. After the defeat of the reform movement of the Prague Spring in 1968-1969, Skácel was demised from his position of the editor-in-chief of the journal *Host do domu* in spring 1969, though he could continue to work as an editor for poetry till the final closedown of the periodical in 1970. Subsequently, he lost his job (as everyone else from the staff), his books were banned, he had difficulties finding another work and lived in very difficult material conditions throughout the 1970s. He finally could start publishing again in 1981, not in a major publishing house in Prague though, but in a regional publishing house in Brno called Blok. Although he could then publish, it was extremely difficult and his life was never the same as before. The work on the translations for theatre was a way to continue to write and work in spite of the fact that he was a proscribed author and in the beginning of the 1980s his first texts for theatre were appearing under a cover name, František Raný, for example in the programme of the *Snow Queen* staged at the Theatre *Laterna Magika* in Prague (Kožmín 168).

In 1984, the Mahen Theatre in Brno staged Skácel's adaptation of *Oedipus*. Skácel later reworked the text, which was then performed during the season 1987/1988 in the theatre Divadlo na Vinohradech in Prague. Apparently, Skácel also wished to give his own Czech version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. However, at that time, he could not publish and he did not find anyone who would be ready to "lend" his name as a cover for the translation. All these personal loves and affinities of Skácel's are reflected in his poetry of the same period. We would like to concentrate in particular on the collection *Kdo pije potmě víno* ("Who drinks wine in darkness"), published in 1988, a year before the poet's death.

“Weeping for Hecuba”

Apart from some references to the Slavic folklore and local history (the mention of the Queen Eliška Rejčka, buried in Brno, for example), this collection of poetry is full of classical references to the occidental culture—classical drama, classical mythology and Shakespeare. The motto of the book is a quote from Blaise Pascal—“I can agree only with those who continue to seek in anxiousness.”² The section with the most frequent classical references is called “Weeping for Hecuba.” A figure that appears very often is that of Oedipus. The opening poem of the section “Teiresias čte zprávu o králi Oidipovi napsanou Braillovým slepeckým písmem” (“Teiresias reads the message about king Oedipus written in braille”) helps us to understand the meaning Skácel attributes to the figure of Oedipus: . . . *Oidipus / chtěl poznat pravdu ano / po celý život o ni usilujeme / nechtějme ji však mít / dokonce vlastnit jako sandály a dům // Nepatří nikomu a všichni oslepli / kterým se podařilo prohlédnout // Takový byl i případ Oidipův . . .*³ (Skácel 319).

Skácel gives us also other clues as to the understanding of the motive of Oedipus and of blindness in his answer to a question of 1984 why he chose *Oedipus*:

Sofoklova hra o Oidipovi mne fascinuje. V této tragédii dovedl antický básník lidskou bytost do krajnosti lidské tíživosti i lidské bídy, aby nakonec zahrnul člověka nesmírným soucitem a soustrastí. Drama klade otázku svobody a ptá se, jsou-li lidé pány svých osudů, anebo podřízení slepé nutnosti. Zatímco ti, kteří vidí, jsou zaslepeni, moudrý slepec Teiresias vidí. A Oidipus prohlédne teprve, až se zbaví zraku. Tuto krásnou a smutnou metaforu jsem vždycky obdivoval.⁴ (Jan Skácel, 1984, qtd. in Kožmín 173)

² “Mohu dát za pravdu jen těm, kdo v úzkostech hledají.”

³ “. . . Oedipus / wanted to know the truth yes / we strive for truth the whole life / but let us not wish to have it / own it even like sandals or a house // It does not belong to anyone all went blind / those who succeeded in seeing // That was the case of Oedipus as well . . .” (Trans. Petra James)

⁴ “I am fascinated by Sophocles’ play about Oedipus. In this tragedy, the poet of antiquity led the human being to the edge of human ambition and misery, in order to, in the end, cover the man with compassion and sympathy. The tragedy poses the question of liberty and asks whether men are masters of their own destiny or whether they are subdued to a blind

The motive of blindness by Skácel is often combined with the motive of silence. As if those who accept blindness and silence can arrive at a higher level of understanding and knowledge. To be blind (or to be banned) is to be an outcast, someone who is neither seen, nor heard, whose existence is ignored or even denied. Nevertheless, this marginal position enables the outsider to see things others would not notice. Thus, the figure of Oedipus helps Skácel to better seize his own existential situation:

Zakázaný člověk

.....
Pomalů přivýkám si na ticho a vůně

.....
A jsem zas neslyšný jak neslyšné je světlo

Tak dopodrobna zabývám se tichem
Že podle hmatu podřezávám strach

Cizí i svůj

A proto když se slepí ohlédnou
Jako bych patřil k nim

Spolu se provlékáme potmě uchem jehly⁵
(Skácel 286-287)

necessity. Whereas those who see are blinded, the wise blind Theireisisas sees. I've always admired this beautiful and sad metaphor." (Trans. Petra James)

⁵ "A Banned Person // . . . / Slowly, I am getting used to silence and smells / . . . // And again I cannot be heard as light cannot be heard / I am so focused on the exploration of silence / That, in the darkness, I slit the throat of fear by touch // Of mine and that of the others // That is why when the blind people look back / I feel as if I belonged to them // Together we are threading the needle into darkness." (Trans. Petra James)

The poem “Weeping for Hecuba” and its classical references

This poem of the section bearing the same title refers to the famous Shakespearean tragedy, *Hamlet*, and to the character of the classical mythology, Hecuba. The wife of the Trojan king Priam and mother of many children (among them Hector, Paris and Cassandra), all of which gradually die in the war conflict with the Greeks and its aftermath, is usually considered as a symbol of an utmost female grief—losing her husband and all her children, only to be finally taken by Ulysses as a slave to Ithaca.

In Shakespeare’s drama, Hamlet has the intention to re-enact the story of the mourning of Hecuba (as it is described by Aeneas to Dido in the classical epic poem *Aeneid*) in the presence of his mother and his uncle in order to reveal their true feelings. When he asks an actor to perform the speech in front of him before the actual representation, the actor is so moved by the story that tears come into his eyes when he describes the sorrows of Hecuba:

But if the gods themselves did see her then,
When she saw Pyrrhus make malicious sport
In mincing with his sword her husband’s limbs,
The instant burst of clamour that she made
(Unless things mortal move them not at all)
Would have made milch the burning eyes of heaven,
And passion in the gods.
Hamlet, 2, 2, 499-505 (Shakespeare 82)

After the actors leave, Hamlet reflects in his soliloquy on the nature of acting and the illusion of feeling and passion it has the power to produce. Are these true feelings or just professional pretension? Can someone be truly moved by a destiny, though tragic, of someone to whom he has no personal connection? He also contrasts the apparent expression of feelings of the actor with his own inability to act and to express in a concrete way his anguish at the death of his father:

Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage wanned,

Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspéct,
A broken voice and his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit; and all for nothing!
For Hecuba!
What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
That he should weep for her? What would he do,
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have? He would drown the stage with tears,
Hamlet, 2, 2, 535-547 (Shakespeare 83)

Skácel focuses in his poem particularly at the contrast between the feelings of the actors and those of Hamlet:

Pláč pro Hekubu

Umírá Hamlet
A čtyři kapitáni na ramenou nesou
Do zákulisí mrtvého
A vojsko – vojsko střílí

Potom se herci v šatnách odlíčí
A jdou se po svém trápit
Po schodech jdou si dolů do klubu
Zaplakat pro Hekubu

Hra pokračuje

Srdce napovídá nad rozlitým vínem
Noc bývá rozpůlena jako jablko
A pilně ryjí krtci
V nepletých zahradách duše
Ofélie
S rukama nahýma až po loket
Azalky trhá mezi kopřivami

Hra trvá dál

Ještě se celí z pravdy nevyhlali
A teprve až k ránu bílému
Kdy luna jako labuť umírá a zpívá,
(ten divný pták)
teprve k ránu odcházejí domů

se šmouhou na tváři jak od krve
se šminkou která zbyla

Až do skonání světa budou Hamleti
Umírat na scéně
A herci nahlas plakat pro Hekubu⁶
(Skácel 323-324)

Skácel thus, in the years of his most acute existential distress, stands on the side of a silent pain, taciturn anguish that he prefers to the inauthenticity of the superficial and fake weeping of the actors. In his poem, the mourning actors (whose lamentation is just pretence) survive and after the end of the play, they go to drink in a bar, and later go back home. The one who dies from his sorrow and emotional anguish is Hamlet. The silent Hamlet, who doesn't openly show his grief and is hesitant about taking a visible, decisive action.

The Central European fate, bound strongly in the 1970s and 1980s to the fate of the Eastern block is grasped by the Czech poet not through some local, Eastern European context, hero, or epic story but rather through transcribing it into a larger context of classical European culture and civilisation. The figure of Hamlet is just another variation on the blindness and silence of Oedipus, a reaction to the horrors of human existence. As for Hecuba, she represents the utmost example of human sorrow. All these figures taken from classical Western cultural canon represent extreme examples of human misery and also of the absurd aspects of human existence. By choosing these references, Skácel transcends his local historical context and personal situation and in his poetry succeeds in reaching general existential resonance.

⁶ “Weeping for Hecuba // Hamlet is dying / on their shoulders, four captains / carry the dead to the backstage / And the army – the army fires / Then, the actors take off their make-up in the cloakroom / And go to mourn in their proper way / They walk down the stairs to the club / To weep for Hecuba // The play continues // The heart prompts over spilt wine / The night is split in half like an apple / And the moles dig diligently / In gardens of the soul full of weeds / Ophelia / With hands naked up to the elbows / Is picking azaleas among nettles // The play goes on // They have not lied themselves out of truth yet / only early in the morning / when the moon, like a swan, is dying and singing, / (that strange bird) / only early in the morning do they go home / with a smear on their cheek as if it was blood / with a bit of make-up left behind // Till the end of times Hamlets will be / dying on stage / And actors will be weeping loudly for Hecuba.” (Trans. Petra James)

As an emigrant, Zagajewski is more aware than Skácel of the ambiguous position of a Central (Eastern) European intellectual, who is being torn between the historical heritage of the geographical region he was born to and his intellectual affiliation with the universal occidental cultural, heritage he feels he belongs to. Zagajewski's poem entitled "Barbarians" reflect clearly poet's difficult position:

Barbarzyńcy

To my byliśmy barbarzyńcami.
To przed nami drżeliście w waszych pałacach.
Na nas czekaliście z bijącym sercem.
To o naszych językach mówiliście:
*chyba składają się wyłącznie z spółgłosek,
z szelestów, szepcótów i suchych liści.*
To my żyliśmy w czarnych lasach.
To nas bał się Owidiusz w Tomi,
to my czciliśmy bogów o imionach
których nie umieliście wymówić.
Ale my także zazналиśmy samotności
i lęku, i zapragnęliśmy poezji.⁷

(Zagajewski, 1999: 20)

Zagajewski's definition of the barbaric and the civilized seem to follow the original classical South-North divide and he is well aware of its classical Greek and Latin origins as the poem visibly demonstrates. The most important criteria to distinguish the lands of the civilization from those of the barbarians, and that constitutes an important link between Zagajewski and Skácel, is that of culture:

Czy iść z pogodnymi i niewinnymi malarzami Sieny, artystami quattrocenta, dla których nawet piekło miało pewien pastelowy wdzięk, dla których diabeł nosił

⁷ "The Barbarians // We were the barbarians. / You trembled before us in your palaces. / You awaited us with pounding hearts. / You commented on our languages: / they apparently consist of consonants alone, / of rustles, whispers, and dry leaves. / We were those who lived in the dark forests. / We were what Ovid feared in Tomi, / we were the worshippers of gods with names / you could not pronounce. / But we too knew loneliness / and fear, and began longing for poetry." (Trans. Clare Cavanagh. Zagajewski, 2003: 54)

tylko kostium diabła? Czy raczej z malarzami Północy, którzy wiedzą dobrze, czym jest brzydota, objawiająca się i w ludzkich twarzach, wykrzywionych spazmem nienawiści, i w niedoskonałej unii natury i cywilizacji? Nie ma wyboru; trzeba jeździć do Włoch i podziwiać ten kruchy cud utalentowanego narodu, ale wracając z Italii trzeba od nowa uświadamiać sobie, iż Europa składa się z łacińskiego Południa i barbarzyńskiej Północy i że ten podział jest starszy niż Jałta i inne zdradzieckie traktaty, a ta Północ też jeszcze jest podzielona, i ja także jestem podzielony. (Zagajewski, 1998: 185)⁸

The culture (and thus the civilization) is then for Zagajewski more a state of mind than a geographical notion. Whether the poet lives in the East or in the West he can carry culture with him (that is also what Zagajewski experiences himself). This tension is in our opinion common to a great number of East European poets and writers who struggle with their cultural affiliation to the West and their geographical belonging to the East. Even if the references to the classical culture stay central for Zagajewski's work in the 1990s and 2000s, he seems to be more and more interested in reflections on the specificities of East European history, especially that of the 20th century. A good example of this shift is his book *Niewidzialna ręka* (*The Invisible Hand*) published in Cracow in 2009. Indeed, the loss of the Eastern Polish territories to the Soviet Union and the forceful displacement of its population to the newly acquired Western part of Poland seem to represent an important subject in Zagajewski's poems since the second half of the 1980s. Zagajewski was himself born in Lwov (in 1945) and soon displaced with his family. His poetic work enables him to go back to this history. The experience of an exile and the fact that Zagajewski has lived through the period of the post-communist transformations of the former Eastern block, unlike Skácel, permits the Polish poet not only to seize

⁸ "Should we follow the serene painters of Sienna, full of innocence, and the artists of Quattrocento for whom even the hell had a certain pastel charm, for whom the devil was actually only wearing a costume of a devil? Or should we rather follow the artists of the North who know what ugliness is, manifesting itself in the faces of men deformed by spasms of hatred or in the imperfect union between nature and civilization. We do not have a choice: we have to go to Italy in order to admire the fragile miracle of a talented people, but on our return, we have to realize that Europe consists of the Latin South and the Barbaric North and that this division goes further back than Yalta and other treacherous treaties and that this North is also divided and so am I." (Trans. Petra James)

the universal from the Western cultural tradition but to explore more in detail the specific features related to the East European fate.

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Summary

The article reflects on the striking discrepancy between the Western idea of the civilization of Eastern Europe and the way East European poets tend to understand themselves. Indeed, it shows on the examples of the poems by Adam Zagajewski (born in 1945) and Jan Skácel (1922-1989) that the identification with the classical Western civilization and culture is one of the major defining elements of the creation of these authors. The Antiquity and classical culture seem to represent for both poets a major aspect of their own bonding with the civilization of the West. The study focuses especially on their creation of the 1980s, last years of Skácel's life and also the last years of the totalitarian regime in Eastern Europe when the East-West division was still a tangible, everyday reality and in Zagajewski's case also on his texts written in the 1990s that very well reflect the post-communist transformation of the Eastern part of Europe and the new challenges it brings along.

Key words: comparative literature, Czech poetry, Polish poetry, Western civilization and "barbarians," Jan Skácel, Adam Zagajewski

Jan Skácel i Adam Zagajewski:
Czeski i polski poeta o cywilizacji i barbarzyńcach

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł prezentuje uderzającą rozbieżność pomiędzy zachodnim wyobrażeniem cywilizacji Europy Wschodniej a sposobem, w jaki skłonni są postrzegać siebie poeci wschodnioeuropejscy. Analizując poszczególne wiersze Adama Zagajewskiego (urodzonego w 1945 r.) i Jana Skácela (1922-1989), można zauważyć, iż jednym z głównych elementów twórczości tych autorów jest ich identyfikacja z klasyczną kulturą i cywilizacją Zachodu. Do podstawowych czynników budujących więź twórców z Zachodem należy – jak się zdaje – starożytna kultura klasyczna. Przeprowadzone w pracy badania skupiają się przede wszystkim na twórczości obu poetów z lat 80., czyli ostatnich lat życia Skácela, a także ostatnich lat istnienia totalitarnego reżimu w Europie Zachodniej (kiedy podział Wschód-Zachód był jeszcze wymiernym elementem codziennej rzeczywistości) oraz, jeśli uwzględnić także teksty Zagajewskiego z lat 90., wizjach trafnie odzwierciedlających postkomunistyczną transformację wschodniej części Europy oraz przyniesione przez nią nowe wyzwania.

Słowa kluczowe: komparatystyka literacka, poezja czeska, poezja polska, cywilizacja zachodnia i „barbarzyńcy”, Jan Skácel, Adam Zagajewski