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To Set the Time Right: Truth and Atonement in Tomas Venclova's Work

One of the enduring givens of the human condition is that each creative act is bounded, by definition, by the specificities of a historical moment and the parameters of an individual life. As such, we also know that there are periods more or less conducive to this process. And while much research has been carried out regarding epochs propitious to creation, conversely, we know far less about the nature of creativity at the nadir of history, its unique tasks and challenges. It is this genre of creation—which emerges from the realm of endurance and resistance—that, in our present moment of democratic regression, is in critical need of study, and with it, a full estimation of the wealth of contributions by postwar Eastern and Central European artists and thinkers such as Tomas Venclova and his generation whose writings, both literary and ethical, now appear before us as urgent and necessary guides.

1.

In Hannah Arendt's essay, "Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship," which addresses the moral traumas of the Second World War, she writes that one of the most difficult revelations of the period—beyond the sheer physical terror experienced—was witnessing the ease with which the whole fabric of pre-war ethical life, once taken for granted, could be so quickly torn apart. Further, highly problematic for Arendt's generation, was not only that individuals had been incapable of upholding the prior precepts of ethical life, but, during and after the fact, how clearly inadequate the actual "concepts and yardsticks" had shown themselves to be. Or, as Arendt reflects: "how little (...) they had been framed or intended to be applied to conditions as they actually arose."¹ Given such

1 Hannah Arendt, "Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship" in: Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. by Jerome Kohn, New York: Schocken Books, 2003, pp. 24-25.

knowledge, one of the major dilemmas faced by the immediate postwar generation was how one could re-invest with meaning the human ethical project, if, under extreme conditions, it could be so quickly rendered obsolete. Similarly, what meaning could literature have, as it faced parallel dilemmas.

One of the fundamental contributions of Tomas Venclova and those of his circle² was precisely a rebuilding of these two domains—ethics and literature, under repressive conditions, and within frameworks re-imagined amid post-war ruins. Though elements of this “ethics in praxis” were partly drawn from previous traditions, one of the characteristics of this renewal of ethics and literature was that it was not imposed abstractly from above, and as such, had to manifest a certain durability, a certain provability. This entailed a reevaluation of underlying ethical and literary assumptions, and a rigorous trial and error method concerning how resistance and art could be reconceived and carried out. This has significant implications for the period we are now facing.

In *Magnetic North*, one of the first and essential tasks that Venclova describes confronting as a young man—intrinsically bound up with a reemergence of ethics and authentic literature—concerned pure factuality: the need to reestablish the contours of a lost, historically verifiable past. This most elemental foundation was the *sine qua non* for a re-appropriation of reality, and with it, a reaffirmation of logic and a sense of truth, as we are given it. As Venclova

2 In this essay I have used the term “circle” to indicate that Venclova’s search for ethical coordinates was not a solitary one. While initially centered around Vilnius, Venclova’s “circles,” in time, extended to Moscow, Tartu and Warsaw, and were both literary and civic in nature. In *Magnetic North*, Venclova describes the members of the first of such groups: “(...) at the age of twenty or twenty-one I was already a member of a coterie to which [Juozas] Tumelis, Pranas [Morkus], as well as my old friend Romas Katilius belonged. Somewhere on the outskirts of the group was Zenonas Butkevičius (...) There were also the “bourgeois intellectual” girls [Judita Vaičiūnaitė and Aušra Sluckaitė] with whom we frequently shared banned texts. A bit later, two additional and exciting people arrived from Moscow. One of them was Virgilijus Čepaitis, a young man who had studied (...) the art of translation at the Gorky Institute where he rubbed shoulders with the celebrities of the Thaw Generation, including Yevtushenko and Akhmadulina. He brought along with him (...) Natasha Trauberg (...).” Later, important members of Venclova’s circle would include the poets Natalya Gorbanyevska and Joseph Brodsky. For a full account of Venclova’s creative and intellectual alliances see: Tomas Venclova, Ellen Hinsey, *Magnetic North: Conversations with Tomas Venclova*, Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2017. For later quoting from this edition the abbreviation MN and the page number will be indicated in brackets.

would later write in his essay “Czesław Miłosz: Despair and Grace”: “Totalitarianism, as well as all the chaos of history, threatens the temporal dimensions of humanity first of all; if we wish to have a future, we must have a past.”³ In this endeavor, Venclova and his circles, first in Vilnius and then in Moscow, not only faced concrete totalitarian censorship—closed stacks and forbidden books—but an interior overcoming of the cognitive dissonance between official Communist discourse and what they saw and experienced first-hand.⁴ In *Magnetic North* Venclova speaks of this internal process during his childhood:

I had a strong, though mostly unarticulated, feeling that the world was out of joint (...). People were poor, and most of them were obviously frightened. I tried to ascribe this to the aftermath of the recently-ended war (...) a temporary phase that would, in time, give way to a more satisfying life. At the outset (...) my skepticism regarding official ideology was immature and undeveloped, but in my last years of school it became more coherent. (MN, 90)

During Venclova’s formative high school years, this quest for historical recovery to redress the world’s “disjointedness”—and the future poet’s quest to “set the world right”—was expedited following his acquaintance with schoolmate and future physicist Ramūnas (Romas) Katilius. While, due to the holdings in Venclova’s father’s library,⁵ he had already begun this journey, the possibility of a dialogical exchange with a close peer changed the pace and scope of discovery. Venclova describes the ethos of their clandestine sharing:

We discussed literature and physics, history and biology, morality and philosophy; if one of us managed to get hold of any new information, not easily available in school or elsewhere, he would immediately share it with the other. (...) once, [Romas] showed me a large volume of documents about the Soviet deportations,

3 Tomas Venclova, *Forms of Hope*, Riverdale-on-Hudson: The Sheep Meadow Press, 1999, p. 121.

4 Similar descriptions of political awakening appear in memoirs of the period. See also: Lyudmila Alexeyeva, *The Thaw Generation*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990, pp. 65-109 and Andrei Sakharov, *Memoirs*, Random House Value Publishing, 1995, pp. 269-286.

5 Despite Antanas Venclova’s high-ranking position in the Soviet *nomenklatura*, his library contained numerous forbidden or semi-forbidden authors, including certain books that were contained in locked cabinets (MN, 101-102).

printed under the Nazi occupation. Both of us were disgusted at the prevalence of anti-Semitism in the volume (...) but the facsimiles of the documents (...) looked convincing. (MN, 93)

If at the outset, Venclova's search for reliable historical facts by which to set the coordinates of his developing worldview was an incremental process, he also notes that, in certain cases, the intrusion of a significant political event could produce a sudden moment of illumination. Venclova describes this in Buddhist terms: a moment of insight during which the mind abruptly transcends the imposed limits of totalitarian reality, and the regime's nature is laid bare. Venclova writes: "Later, I often compared that moment to Zen Buddhist *satori*—a flash of awareness that changes one's worldview forever." (MN, 138) Such a definitive turning point for Venclova came during the suppression of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution:

For me, and perhaps others, it was the day of sudden awakening. In a split second, I understood that we still lived in a Stalinist universe, and that any attempt at "correcting its mistakes" in an evolutionary way was simply naïve. The system had to be dismantled, period. One could—and should—contribute to its demise, if only modestly, but for that you had to place yourself as far as possible outside the system. (MN, 138)

Through sudden insight and incremental labor to reconstruct the past, what Venclova and his circle had discovered was that, as Arendt puts it in her "Lying in Politics": "(...) the liar is defeated by reality, for which there is no substitute (...) no matter how large the tissue of falsehood that an experienced liar has to offer, it will never be large enough, even if he enlists the help of computers, to cover the immensity of factuality."⁶ Although Arendt states there are moments of terror when a population is forced to "disregard altogether the distinguishing line between truth and falsehood in order to survive,"⁷ what Venclova's entourage reaffirmed was that under all but those most extreme conditions, even small amounts of truth carried with them the potential to undo the fabric of falsehood.

6 Hannah Arendt, "Lying in Politics" in: Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1972, p. 7.

7 *Ibid.*

In this, not only factuality, but also literature played an important part. Far from the marginal role often attributed to it in the West, for Venclova, any genuine work of literature is sufficient to defeat totalitarianism, in that it inherently contains in its matrix dimensions of individuality and truth:

I believe one of Stalin's biggest mistakes was that he never banned non-Soviet literature altogether. Dostoyevsky, Proust and Modernism as such were banned or at least semi-banned, but Cervantes, Schiller and Dickens were not. One could easily buy their works or read them in the library. The same was true of Pushkin (...). And any literature of quality sustains an anti-totalitarian world outlook and anti-totalitarian mores by definition. (MN, 93)

Such insights into dangerous knowledge, however, such “tears in the fabric of untruth” bestowed upon Venclova and his circle a responsibility and a mission. After concluding his university studies and establishing a semi-clandestine study group broken up by the KGB (MN, 160-169), Venclova progressively turned to writing. While he had begun to compose verse as a young person, it was during this period that he began to seriously interrogate questions of language and undertook to find a personal poetic vocabulary adequate for authentic literature and witness. As the aforementioned gap between official rhetoric and received reality on the one hand, and a reestablished factuality and logic on the other hand continued to widen, for Venclova, and a number of those in his entourage—including Judita Vaičiūnaitė, Natalia Gorbanyevsaka and, later, Joseph Brodsky—poetry in particular began to take root in this interstitial space, “the joint” that existed between the surrounding totalitarian worldview and the inner consciousness of the individual.

It is one of the mysteries of language that poetry, as an art form, has a long tradition of being a site for contemplation on essential and ultimate matters of mind and conscience. Already present in pre-Socratic sources, such as Parmenides' famous work *On Nature* that explores “the way of truth” (*alētheia*) and “the way of opinion” (*doxa*), poetry has enduringly served as a nexus for mind, language and the revelations of insight. While a full exploration of the role of poetry as a site for consciousness, conscience and ethics cannot be undertaken here, its role as such is reflected in much postwar work within the Soviet bloc. Further, one attribute intrinsic to what we call poetry is the mysterious manner

by which the art manifests truthfulness through the most subtle movements of language—and conversely, the way in which insincerity is immediately detected by the reader. Even more demanding than prose—which is permitted certain uses of “everyday rhetoric”—poetry is constrained to a rigorous authenticity of thought and language akin to the way hard magnetic ore must point towards a true north.

In reading Venclova’s early verse from the 1960s—in light of this ethical *tabula rasa* and his circle’s attempt to distinguish historical starting points that could be unconditionally affirmed—on a textural level, one observes in his work a radical “filtering out” and paring down, as if, at moments, the poet’s reliable constants are exclusively that of time and the elements. While rich in literary allusions, Venclova’s poems of the period are thus of an extreme economy, yet nevertheless affirm the existence of basic ethical materials. One senses Venclova starting again—and slowly building, with utmost reserve—as if only recording what has been verified by conscience:

Better to forget. All is untruth, after all.
 Experiences, approximations, beginnings.
 I can no longer say what touches us:
 Perhaps just air, sprouting beneath the snow,
 Having taken this night to learn by heart
 Our lofty science, rife with imperfections.

“All night, sleep was equivalent to time,” 1966 (trans. Diana Senechal)⁸

Significant also to Venclova’s recovery of ethical and literary coordinates was his encounter with individuals of an older generation, in particular his grandfather and the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, who had retained their bearings even during the darkest years of the Stalinist period. Venclova writes about Akhmatova:

It was a poetic as well as an ethical legacy: namely, loyalty to one’s friends, stubborn yet calm resistance to the violence of the State, and, last but not least, irony and

8 Tomas Venclova, *The Junction: Selected Poems*, ed. by Ellen Hinsey, Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2009, p. 99.

self-irony. (...) In short, she stood for a hierarchy of values: good and evil had to be called by their names, period. Through communicating with her, one became aware that this ethical hierarchy was intimately—if not necessarily directly—connected with authentic poetry. These convictions were a potent antidote to the moral collapse during the Soviet period—as well as to Soviet or semi-Soviet literature. (MN, 197)

As a living embodiment of pre-Soviet ethics and an “antidote to moral collapse,” Akhmatova’s example, for Venclova as well as others of his circle, was seminal. Joseph Brodsky, in his memoirs with Solomon Volkov, describes the impact of his encounter with Akhmatova as a “tanning of the soul.”⁹ This reestablishment of factuality and base values characterizes much of Venclova’s work until 1977, when, following his co-founding and deepening involvement with the Lithuanian Helsinki group,¹⁰ the Soviet authorities “invited” the poet to emigrate.¹¹ During this period in Lithuania Venclova had been confronted with the multiple challenges of untruth, silence, censorship of his work and the risk of punishment. But what about Venclova’s poetic ethics in emigration?

2.

“For an Older Poet,” written in the late 1990s after Venclova’s departure from Lithuania, and first published in the volume *Sankirta* (Vilnius, 2005), is central to a further understanding of the poet’s reflections on ethics and truth-telling—

9 Solomon Volkov, *Conversations with Joseph Brodsky: A Poet's Journey Through The Twentieth Century*, New York: Free Press, 2002, p. 240.

10 The Public Group to Promote the Implementation of the Helsinki Accords in Lithuania (*Helsinkio susitarimų vykdymui remti Lietuvos visuomeninė grupė*) was co-founded in 1976 by Viktoras Petkus, Eitanas Finkelšteinas, Tomas Venclova, Karolis Garuckas and Ona Lukauskaitė-Poškienė. For an in-depth history of the group’s founding see: MN, 271–298.

11 Unknown until the opening of the Soviet Archives, the official order calling for Venclova’s expulsion from the Soviet Union was established at the highest levels. In a letter dated November 15, 1976, Yuri Andropov, the then Chairman of the Committee for State Security, called for the end of the Helsinki group’s activities, and on January 20, 1977 it was stated that Venclova should leave the country, and that his “fate” in exile would be based on his “behavior while abroad.” See: MN, 301.

as well as the complex necessity for acts of atonement. In “For an Older Poet,” Venclova speaks about his relationship with his father, Antanas Venclova, and those of his father’s generation. This poignant and magisterial poem is the site of a reenactment of the knotty, but infinitely human, encounter between son and father, overlaid with the highly thorny matter of Tomas’s father’s position within the Soviet *nomenklatura* in post-war Lithuania. Minister of Education with the first war-time Soviet-installed People’s Government, Antanas Venclova was a member of the 1940 delegation to Moscow that requested the incorporation of Lithuania into the USSR; after the war he subsequently held a number of official Soviet positions (MN, 95-97). “For an Older Poet” is therefore a settling of accounts regarding the “sins of the fathers,” but is also, more generally, a reflection on the fraught nature of relationships and the human condition. For here, it is no longer in the realm of the elemental, but in the close, oppressive, almost Shakespearean space of intergenerational struggle, that the poem’s narrator first describes the bonds of childhood, followed by a child’s maturation and differentiation process, and with this, an awareness of human weakness:

It wasn’t easy. When I was nearly fifteen,
I spied out your weaknesses, the ones you didn’t want to own,
or even those of which you were proud. Because of this,
I learned to breathe thin Alpine air, to travel
on the backs of trucks, to light matches in the rain,
to brew bad coffee, to subject myself to self-scrutiny—
all of which, in a way, guaranteed we wouldn’t be the same
in voice or script.

The poem continues unflinchingly to address the complexities of a single human life that—despite at times our wishes to the contrary—cannot be neatly divided into good and evil:

Of course, there were days
you wished to strike from your consciousness. There were friends
behind barbed wire. You helped some of them—said they
didn’t remember the good you’d done. You lived like your contemporaries,
perhaps more consistently—so that I might noiselessly move my lips

repeating the words not said after your departure:
 may they rest in peace, Lord. Without nightmares.
 And may Eternal Light shine upon them. Like a light in a coal mine.

The poem's most complex and unexpected stanza, however, is its final one. Here the narrator-dissident son, who, through his own acts of truth-telling and conscience could perhaps rightfully claim a place at a *distance* from the father—paradoxically returns and draws the two lives back together:

You rarely appear in dreams these days,
 but sometimes you do. We are both hurrying to the station,
 (...)

 the corridors are labyrinthine, there are too many steps. But you live on
 as long as I follow the echo of your footsteps, your unsteady breathing, the pain
 in your chest (which I sometimes also feel). Your gestures continue in me,
 no matter how hard I try to suppress them. The cadence of your voice
 resurfaces in my foreign speech. As you diminish,
 I also grow smaller. One day I'll wake up in the station
 and see you. The lamp suspended from the carriage's end
 will sway and start to pull away—pick up speed—but we'll remain standing,
 without looking at each other, estranged and identical.¹²

In light of the political insights previously described, the ethical framing of the poem's end might seem at first difficult to situate. Shouldn't the poet, given the knowledge he has gathered—his understanding of the nature of the Soviet regime and his father's acts—instead *draw away from him* and universally condemn him? What truth-telling is there in this poem?

Yet, it is precisely here, in a poetic zone fraught with complexity, that Venclova struggles with a critical issue of postwar ethics. Informed by the dimensionality of lived experience, the text poses the question of whether we will indeed be free of the sins of the father based entirely on the strength of our condemnation of them—something that the poet would, no doubt, be hypothetically capable of. Instead, in "For an Older Poet," Venclova seeks to portray a different

12 Tomas Venclova, *The Junction*, p. 30.

type of truth-telling: an exploration of the complex and oft-times contradictory nature of human attachment; as such, the poem plunges us into the shadowy labyrinth of the human heart. Rather than a theoretical, and unattainable, moral perfection—in which the poet fears lurks a mirror image of totalitarian rigidity and forced denunciations¹³—Venclova bears his own weaknesses and chooses a recognition of the uncomfortable communality of flesh.

In speaking about this most problematic of issues in *Magnetic North* Venclova writes:

As regards some of [my father's] choices, there is simply no excuse. But in attempting to judge such cases—which were only too numerous at that time—there are essentially two approaches. One is ethical absolutism, which leads to unconditional condemnation. The other is compassion. I can only choose compassion, and not simply because I am speaking about someone close to me. My own life took a different direction, but I cannot state with any confidence how I would have conducted myself if I were in my father's place. (MN, 97)

Further, the unspoken assumption that the son will only be free of the father's sins through condemnation is something that bears reflection. The Bible, as we know, is equivocal about intergenerational guilt and whether the “sins of the father” will be visited upon the sons. In the books of Exodus [34:7] and Deuteronomy [5:9], as well as Numbers [14:18] we read that the “iniquity of the fathers” will be visited upon the children, “to the third and the fourth generation.” Yet in Ezekiel [18:19-20] we read an opposite passage, presented in dialogical form:

Yet you say, “Why should not the son suffer for the iniquity of the father?” When the son has done what is just and right, and has been careful to observe all my statutes, he shall surely live. (...) The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself (...).

13 For Venclova, such a position on condemnation is informed by his understanding of the State's violent determination to further isolate individuals and assert control by breaking the bonds of family, epitomized in stories such as that of Pavlik Morozov.

Thus, in “For an Older Poet,” Venclova explores the double burden of the interstitial role of generations about which Arendt has also written: “As for the nation, it is obvious that every generation, by virtue of being born into a historical continuum, is burdened by the sins of the fathers as it is blessed with the deeds of the ancestors. Whoever takes upon himself political responsibility will always come to the point where he says with Hamlet:

The time is out of joint: O cursed spite
That ever I was born to set it right!

Arendt continues: “To set the time aright means to renew the world, and this we can do because we all arrived at one time or another as newcomers in a world which was there before us and will still be there when we are gone, when we shall have left its burden to our successors.”¹⁴ This space of a new generation of sons and daughters is therefore, for Arendt, a place of potential, as “it is only in a metaphorical sense that we can say we *feel* guilty for the sins of our father or our people or of mankind, in short for deeds we have *not* done.”¹⁵

And yet, if indeed as Arendt says, in a strict juridical sense we are not guilty for the actions of those who came before us, the fact remains that these past actions weigh upon us. Further, for the generations to progress, we understand that there is a need for atonement. And it is more often than not given to the next generation to bear witness for deeds committed by the previous generation. To this end, we have learned that, to be released from the painful acts of the past, with which we are burdened, a truth-telling-in-complexity, in which poetry plays a role, must occur.

Venclova, who in Arendt’s view is *not* guilty of the sins of the father, nevertheless feels called, in the face of the world’s disjointedness, to “set the time right,” which in the poet’s case means an ethics where the historical realities of acts—but also human emotion and compassion—have their place.

“For an Older Poet” situates itself precisely at this point of complexity, between a demand for atonement for inadmissible acts, and the blood ties that call to us to enact forgiveness. The power of “For an Older Poet” is that it does

14 Hannah Arendt, “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship,” pp. 27–28.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

not renounce either task, but instead fuses both things—with their implicit tension and impossibility of reconciliation—into a single creative reflection. As such, the poem draws its “truth” from a depiction of the actual, lived conditions of many of the post-war generation who faced the deforming reality of totalitarianism: a reality that had the power, as Venclova writes of “mutilating human souls” (MN, 159) in its twisting of human emotions and loyalty under the violent pressures and demands of the State.

Similarly, as Arendt notes, it is not only the individual, but also the nation that is burdened and called to make peace with the past. If, in the case of individual lives, truth-telling about family members is a painful challenge weighted with complexity, truth-telling about acts during wartime is the hardest test for a nation. As we have seen, however, in Venclova’s view—regardless of the pain it involves and the courage it demands—contained within all truth-telling there is a restorative dimension that allows for the “time to be set right” and opens up the possibility of a going forward into the “always renewing” potential of time of which Arendt speaks. As Venclova writes in *Magnetic North* concerning reactions to official apologies about the role of Lithuanians during the Shoah:

far too many in Lithuania interpreted this as a national humiliation. Well, repentance does not humiliate. The truth does not humiliate. Telling the truth is the only proper way of restoring dignity. (MN, 41)

For Venclova, through such acts of atonement, an individual—or a nation—is able to restore the just boundaries of an ethical life, an essential pre-condition for dignity, which is also the base from which a renewal of art and civic life can arise.

At a time when the darkness of untruth is again advancing, a deeper understanding of Venclova and his circle’s recovery of ethics “in praxis” and their reinvestment in literature becomes ever more pressing. Moreover, in contrast with the West’s skepticism of postwar ethics, such a tradition of recovery gives rise, conversely, to the central question: at what moral and civic depth does the necessity of ethics reassert itself—and what are the tools for its recovery? The work of Tomas Venclova, as well writers such as Anna Akhmatova and Czesław Miłosz provide us with insights into this question, which we ignore at our peril.