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Home for Creative Work: Between Utopia and Parody.

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In the vicinity of Warsaw there is a small village named Obory. There we can find a charming baroque palace in a cultivated park and in the driveway to the palace a stylish annex. The doorplate informs us that we are in front of the Home for Creative Work for Polish writers. The Potulicki family, a family of landlords, had been the last owner of the Obory palace and of the estate. The palace and the estate were confiscated by the Germans during the Second World War: the youngest branch of the family had been active in anti-Nazi activities. When the communists took over after the war, the palace and the estate were nationalized. But it is not the glamour of the past nor the charm of the place that so impress the visitors: “Five centuries of History look upon you, but the last half of the century is what really counts here, that is, the time when the writers' paradise was located here."l This opinion, taken from a journalist's article, is difficult to challenge.2

This place is a real piece of contemporary Polish literature. Not of literature only, because the Home for Creative Work at Obory was visited and by film and theater directors, journalists, artists, and scholars too... Numerous poems and novels were written and translated here, not to mention critical essays, screenplays, theatrical pieces. This place is also a real King Solomon's mine for lovers of an anecdotal history of literature.

For someone studying the history of this particular place reveals itself as a very special one. It looks strangely as the place where writers were so elevated, and one might say, immorally so, because this elevation happened - and was accepted by them - under circumstances which could hardly be considered praiseworthy. One may say then that the Home For Creative Work was a paradise turned into a “velvet prison" and at the same time into a “vanity fair." But its history, taken as the history of the uncommon elevation of writers above the level of life of their compatriots building happiness in their socialist homeland,

makes one think about something quite different. And of something really unexpected. It makes you to think about the strength of the cultural patterns (also patterns from distant past), empowered to direct an assault on culture. This assault--at once Promethean and grotesque--was planned by the intellectuals overwhelmed with their passion for constructing a social and political reality.

A home, as we learn from anthropologists and historians of religion, is a metaphorical *imago mundi*. And the Home for Creative Work was part of an ideological territory extending from East Berlin to Moscow, filled with edifices known as the "House of the Party," the "House of the Infant," the "House of the Aged Actor" and even a "House of Furniture" and a "House of Footwear". Here I need to add a remark: the Polish word for "home" and "house" is the same, so respecting the difference in English I should translate: The House of Creative Work. But the problem is that the difference was blurred here, as I will want to show, so I am going to use the translation "Home for Creative Work."

The idea for a Home for Creative Work was born in the Soviet Union in the Twenties. In Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* we find Griboyedov's House, a mansion that is now a property of the Moscow Section of the Soviet Writers' Union. In Bulgakov's devilish vaudeville it was "an old cream-colored two-story house that stood in the depths of a withered garden which was separated from the sidewalk by a carved wrought iron fence."2

We pass through the small area in front of the house, paved over with asphalt: In summer it was shaded by a canvas awning and became the outdoor pavilion of a summer restaurant". The Writers' restaurant was famous as the best restaurant in Moscow, where one could eat at low prices. The menu in the restaurant could make you dizzy: it included too many attractions even for a serious gourmand. But let us leave the restaurant because there are several important institutions upstairs. We are passing by the office of the Board of Administration where some folks are badmouthing their lucky colleagues who have been given apartments in a luxury writers' colony in the Moscow suburbia. Then we have the sports section, the section for tourism and for fans of fishing, rooms where you can settle up your one-day trip „delegations" or your paper allocation; there is also a room where the „housing concerns" are examined--the queue for that room begins on the first floor near the concierge's office. And then we are in front of a carved walnut door with a "lush poster depicting a horseman in a Caucasian cloak riding along the crest of mountain cliff with a rifle slung over his shoulders. Further down on the poster were palm trees and a balcony, and on

that balcony a young man with a cowlick was seated, looking upward into space with incredibly alert eyes while holding a fountain pen in his hand. The caption read 'Creative package vacations from two weeks (for a short story or novella) to one year (for a novel or trilogy). Yalta, Suuk-Su, Borovoye, Tsikhidziri, Makhindzhauri. Leningrad (Winter Palace).' This door also had a line, but not a very long one, only about one hundred and fifty people."

Bulgakov's satirical description can also be applied to the literary institutions of all the communist countries after 1945, including Poland. By the edict of The Council of State in 1947 a House of Literature was founded in Warsaw, and early in 1950 the Polish Writers' Union acquired its headquarters in two rococo tenement houses, carefully reconstructed in a rather upscale district of the capital. In addition the buildings included the offices of The Union's administration, a conference room, a library and a reading room, as well as some attic apartments for resident writers. A club and a cafe and a medical dispensary were located on the first floor, and a restaurant in the basement. The restaurant was not as good as its Moscow counterpart described by Bulgakov but the lunches served here were cheaper than in other Warsaw restaurants.

The Home for Creative Work in Obory opened up even earlier, however, on the 18th of September 1948. The President of the Parliament, the Vice-Minister of Culture, some local party activists, the local farm council and representatives of the literary world were present at the opening ceremony. After a year Obory operated full time, as can be seen from records in the memorial book. In keeping with the epoch's style the writers show themselves here a bit like "foremen of socialist labor." They are politically correct and bursting with enthusiasm. All of them praise the lovely atmosphere, excellent working conditions and the hospitality of the director and the personnel. All of them stress that they feel almost at home and how much their motivation has improved here.

What was the special attraction of the place? On top of the good working conditions, of course. The point was that in this enclave encircled by a wall the dilemmas of a writer's condition were solved. Here the gap between the "private" and the "public" (or, in Richard Rorty's words, between the need for solidarity with a collective and the need for a narcissistic dream of self-creation and autonomy) was abolished. For people conscious of the painful incompatibility between these two dimensions and these two value orders (as writers are), the reality of the Home For Creative Work formed a space where those two antagonistic ideals-- *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*-- could find

their realization in a single, harmonic and fulfilled life. It seemed that the dream of an “integrated man" had came true: here a writer felt himself to be an “artist," yet at the same time a “citizen." The socialist eschatology was a new gospel, bringing hope for the possibility of an authentic existence, an existence up to then doomed to float in the mist of contradictions. “If authenticity” Charles Taylor says “is being true to ourselves, is recovering our own ‘sentiment de 1'existence, ’ then perhaps we can only achieve it integrally if we recognize that this sentiment connects us to the wider whole."4

As Taylor has it, Nature was this “wider whole" for the Romantics, and during the romantic period “self-feeling and a sense of belonging to it were linked." In the modern world, inhabited by the people who visited Home For Creative Work, all forms of order--both of the natural and the spiritual kind--were products of modern rationality. They revealed its artificiality and contingency. As Taylor notes, modern instrumental forms of rationality have separated us from Nature, from ourselves and from our souls, throwing us into the world of alienation.

For those conscious of their uprootedness and alienation, the sense of belonging to a “wider whole" was a habit of the heart and an aspect of intellectual and psychic hygiene. But this time the “wider whole" was an intellectual fallacy and a trap for people longing for normality and demoralized by a victory over Nazism that showed itself to be only the victory of another totalitarianism. This “wider whole" proved itself to be a kind of modern captivity, put in the service of a new recreation of an old myth, the myth legitimizing the State and its administrative and spiritual control. But it was easy to suppress the consciousness of that fallacy. Didn’t the world of the Home For Creative Work seem to be a world of a utopia made reality? “In quietness and peace create the masterpieces which will illuminate the world of your children!" This sentence was inscribed on the opening day into Obory’s memorial book by the President of the Municipal Council of the town Obory-Jeziorna. Even if the writers did recognize these words to be pathetically pretentious, they did take credit for them as their proper recipients. Writers working on books awaited by the “working masses" felt free of alienation’s anxiety. They also acquired the sense of importance of their own mission (as writers, that is, as “engineers of human souls," to quote the famous dictum by Mr. Stalin himself). That mission was a kind of stigma, making writer a militant soul in the revolutionary avant-garde.

It looked like the union of the "citizen" and the "artist" could become a historical reality. But not without some pre-conditions. And the main among them was loyalty to the rules: the literary microcosm should mimic the social and political macrocosm (that is, the ideological realities of the communist state). Thus we should not be surprised to find that governmental institutions participated in the founding and the opening of the Home For Creative Work. The House of Literature and the Home For Creative Work as the institutions were metaphors of this "wider whole." Writers were changing into functionaries and literature was turning into a special emanation of modern rationality, now under the cover of historical and dialectical materialism.

The reasons for writers and intellectuals' attitude to communism, not to speak of their vulnerability to the leftist rhetoric and their eagerness to identify with the socialist movement, have been criticized many times. Interpreting this enchantment, Peter Bergen surveyed several different opinions on this subject.5 In the opinion of Vilfredo Pareto, to take an instance, one very attractive idea was that after their (that is, the intellectuals') conversion to communism they join the social elite. According to Joseph Schumpeter, the socialist state offered them not only a good social position but also economical security. For Friedrich yon Hayek, the economical and social privileges were not the only reasons for that romance: as people who blamed themselves for their lack of sense of reality and for their inclination to abstract thinking, they were impressed by the simplicity and rigor of theoretical Marxist constructions.

Undoubtedly, all these arguments are accurate when one considers the Polish reality after 1945. Meanwhile, for those who only visited Poland and got very limited insight into the country's reality, its literary life and the economic condition of writers looked like fulfilled ideals of wise cultural policy. "One of the most amazing things that ever happened to me was to live at a House for Writers. I will remember Obory as a place where respect and honor for writers and poets in People's Democracy made it clear for me how good it is to be here." This is the inscription in the memorial book made by an American visitor in 1955.

The eagerness with which the men and women from literary circles accepted their isolation can be explained much along the lines of Pareto, Hayek and many others. But it is worth remembering (as Berger does) the attractive force of socialist myth. It brought together within itself a belief in progress, in self-improvement-- if not self-salvation-- of man, as well as an emancipated mind overcoming prejudices, and man's ability to create his fate wisely. These

assumptions went together with the romantic protest against social injustice, and with critique of alienation as destroyer of community and cause for spiritual homelessness. As Berger says, socialism promises all the benefits of modernity while abolishing all costs associated with it, including the abolition of alienation. This is not strange if we consider the socialist myth as a modern substitute for religion. And if it really is such a substitute, then one may say that the socialist myth offered by Stalinist ideologists formed a trap described by Adorno and Horkheimer in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. It was a trap and an illusion set by the emancipated mind for its devoted believers, an illusion fabricated as the modern instrumentalized mind multiplied in its successive embodiments, becoming more and more degenerated and taking on the form of a metaphysical belief.

This time and in this project, this modern "Rationalitaet" gained its romantic character-- syncretic and thus all the more attractive. The paradoxical affinity of ideals of the avant-garde art or literature with socialist realism can serve as the illustration for this situation. "Socialist realism-- Boris Groys writes-- put into effect practically all the fundamental watchwords of the avant-garde: it united the artists and gave them a single purpose, erased the dividing line between high and utilitarian art, and between political content and purely artistic decisions. It created a single and easily recognizable style, liberated the artist from the service to the consumer and his individual tastes and from the requirement to be original, becoming part of the common cause of the people, and set itself not to reflect reality, but to project a new and better reality". So as we see, in that model of art reality was treated as easily manageable material.

However, as I stressed at the beginning, the Home For Creative Work being a part of a big historical experiment, became not only a sterile laboratory for socialist mandarins or a reservation for the happy few; practically from the very beginning it became a place that was friendly and nearly a second home for many of its visitors. What factors were decisive such domestication? In his comments on the attitudes of those who engaged themselves into communism, Czeslaw Milosz says: "A Big Enterprise was at stake. A small, enlightened minority had to transform the ignorant majority of the nation. It. was like the Masonic Lodge in Mozart's *Magic Flute*, the lodge in fight with the obscurantism that is the Queen of the Night."7 The Polish Marxists were searching for the Enlightenment parallel; they were the "mad red Encyclopedists." And this invented genealogy and patterns, reinforced by memory and tradition, lead to

not a word being said about their knowledge regarding the fate of the Soviet avant-garde artists decimated by Stalin, a silence that soothed the revolutionary furor in Poland. When we look at it from the perspective of the communist morality, there was not room in Poland for a socialist rococo, yet it appeared unexpectedly at Obory. Those who spent their time there conformed to and mimetized (even if unconsciously) the life of those who once walked, chatted and enjoyed life in the gardens of love and literature, because the world at. Obory was a pastoral world. It was a repetition of *locus amoenus,* a representation of an idyllic, friendly and beautiful place, the space of otium, where a writer's labor could be identified if not with leisure then not far from it.

Obory, as I said, provided a space where the "private" and the "public" could meet, and a place which--like a pastoral Arcadia--was free of risks and dangers (perhaps more than any other place in Poland in those years), that is, risks and dangers animating a public space full of "sound and fury of History. It was a place of political truce: the differences of literary and ideological beliefs would have seemed to be losing their poisonous edges; cohabitation was possible. As Alexander Wat put it in his diary in 1953: "That summer the weather was perfect: in the Obory park the dervishes and the young Turks speak in a gentle, discreet and perhaps tender manner, even to the enemies of the people. (...) Briefly put, it was a beautiful island of escapism, an island brightened by heaven's smiles and full of human goodness, the trees' beauty and the wind's sweet breeze."

One should probably say that the opposition between the "private" and the "public" was nearly nonexistent, or if it not existed the line between them was certainly being erased, and it happened that way because this convention was accepted. In other words, just as the sophisticated and slightly ironic acceptance of artificiality of representation was the precondition for the existence of pastoral literature, so here the precondition was the acceptance of the theatricality of the model in which Obory as an oasis of happiness and creativity was an ideal.

And Obory's theatricality of life had its antecedences. In the new reality, however, this theatricality gained additional and strange dimensions, paradoxically at once idyllic and monumental. So characteristic of the social life at the Versailles court at Versailles or at Marie Antoinette's Petit Trianon, it found its replica during Stalinism. "The seventeenth century elaborated a codex of behavior according to which an existence of the individual has an entirely public

character. To be oneself meant to represent oneself, and the many forms of representation which found their culmination in the times of Louis XIV lasted into the next century." Although the games played there were based on rules different from those applying during the *fetes galantes* at the French court, life at Obory was a spectacle. There all writers represented themselves as eminent literary figures, and even those who were at the beginning of their carrier profited from their social status of "laborers on the ideological front." Which meant that they secured a privileged position in the social stratification. And that just put an obligation on them to obey hierarchies of a different type, those that dominated their inner circle and were characteristic for the etiquette of everyday life. Even if one should break the official etiquette, it would not have meant that the rules would lose their validity.

Obory was a place to which one was allowed so as to drop one's public role, and one could do it easier here than in any other place: writers felt themselves to be at home there, yet the character of the place and of the society gathered there-- the "society of the spectacle"-- would reveal itself anyway. For instance, everybody submitted to the hierarchy of the seats at the dining room table. Here no one would sit where one may have wanted, for everyone was seated appropriately to his (or her) importance. In those years, the manager of Obory was a lady from an old Polish aristocratic family who took care of all the domestic ceremonies and rules. The fact that some positions in artistic institutions like houses for artists or publishers were held by women descending from gentry or aristocracy was significant. While they had to respect the hierarchy of guests, their manners and charm help them to soothe the dreadful rigidity of the political reality.l0 One may add that their presence and their mission evoked and highlighted the artificiality of the situation and its theatricality. Both the managing ladies and the ceremonies they performed were a distant echo from the world of *fetes galantes,* the world of social rituals and games, of cynical and witty conversations in a milieu of fabricated nature or else of gorgeous and noble interiors. What took place in Obory was a conjunction of an Arcadian myth and its theatrical parody, the reality and the disguise. It was not only place filled with the noise of typewriters, in some way similar to the noise from the factories where the workers were "fighting" to achieve their six-year plan. It was a modern "land of earthly delights," an asylum where--just as in the prewar cafes--people discussed, chatted and gossiped. It was also *la maison des rendez-vous*. In many historical anecdotes we find this place stigmatized for

good by the ghost of its first landowner, the sister-in- law of a Polish king. The story has it that her temperament and her love affairs embarrassed the king too much. In Obory she was less trouble for him.

The theatricality of the world there acquired a dimension that was at once idyllic and monumental, though in both cases, and from the very beginning, these forms lent themselves to parody. The palace, the annex and the park were encircled and protected by a wall. The real life went on outside--that was the space of *negotium*: there was the farm (now under state administration), the village where the servants and women who worked in the kitchen lived, and the city of Warsaw with its rude charm, cynicism and expectations. The wall and the gate with a plaque "No admittance for unauthorized persons" separated the insiders, as footlights do in the theatre. The dwellers in the Home for Writers were aware of their "audience" as well as of strangers' watchful eyes. But living "on stage" they did not feel alienated because the world outside looked like the pastoral world, too. The world with its evil existed, of course. But that was textual, and itself also unreal. It was the world of "spiteful dwarfs of reaction," the world of embezzlers and "kulaks," the world of pathetic reactionaries. And also a world divided by frontiers, with the imperialistic portion being ruled by His Satanic Majesty.

From the beginning of the pastoral as a literary genre, duality was the characteristic feature of its representation of the world. We deal then with a poetic image of the Arcadian life, but this image was opposed to the reality outside the pastoral horizon. The opposition of these two worlds, and the conclusions from the confrontation of values linked to each of these worlds always formed the very core of pastoral representation. The situation in the poetry of socialist myth was not different. This poetry--as William Empson put it in *Some Versions of the Pastoral*- -was a new, progressive type of pastoral. The inhabitants of The Home for Writers considered themselves the guardians and the laborers of this new historical reality. They also felt like the emissaries of revolution. When they sat over their white sheet of paper, they did not feel alone. "Salut fraternel et affectueux aux poetes et prosateurs polonais, a ceux dont l'ouvre sera ciment d'un avenir meilleur pour tous les hommes" we read in the inscription by a French poet in April 1954 in Obory's memorial book. And we can find earlier inscriptions in Russian, Chinese, German, and English.... This community looked like a community with no frontiers, for it was a community where--as I indicated -- the frontier between the private and the public

happened to be invisible, forming as it did a stage for performing the mysteries of an idyllic "ideolo" (a term which Milan Kundera in his Book of *Laughter and Forgetting* explained as a euphoric dance of happy fools). Kundera's metaphor is not casual. The story of *Master and Margerita takes place* between the House of Writers and a psychiatric hospital--something that is significant, too. In "The Notebook from Obory," a long poem by Alexander Wat written in 1953, we do find, however, a fragment on the grotesqueness of ideological lunacy.

What I meant to say, I guess, using the example of House for Writers at Obory, is that the tradition of socialist myth gained its caricatural embodiment there. The Utopia turned into its parody, an elegant dance of happy men changed into the dance of happy puppets. But one should remember, nonetheless, that in postwar Poland, where so many writers returning home from deportations, camps, from emigration and homeless wandering to a country where they shared the fate of displaced persons" with so many others, the power of the socialist myth was quite distinct.

In the modern "city pastoral" --as Renato Poggioli put it-- the pastoral longing for solitude and independence, for relaxation, for the friendly landscape of the open countryside changes into the longing for a solitary place akin to a cloister cell, a space that Virginia Woolf named "a room for your own," an asylum necessary for anybody who wants to work in a creative way.12 So maybe it is not so strange that the House for Writers at Obory turned for many into a Home for Writers. And for many it became a substitute for home, a place where one would want to come back as soon as possible. What is the definition of home? "Home is the only place where you can go out and in. There are places you can go into, and places you can go out of, but the one place, if you do find it, where you may go out and in both, is home." 13

Even today, after the change of Poland's political system, despite the lack of state subsidies for the Home, there are writers-- mostly retirees who had become addicted to it—who spend time there every year. They must now tolerate the presence of casual guests. The palace is rented out for weddings parties, family reunions, conferences, etc. It must earn money for its upkeep. More and more the memorial book is becoming a domestic chronicle where one can read the demands on and complaints against the management as well as their praises, or else suggestions for improvements to the enterprise. Life, free of the burdens of the past, of the intense political affairs, now goes on slowly, and in different ways. And in the air now hovers the spirit of pastoral elegy.

[1] Laszek Luhizski, „Dwor w Oborach", *Mad•_smoscz rCulturalne, 1996* nr ^2
[2] Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita,* translated by Diana Burgin and Katherine Tiernan O'Connor, Ardis, California, 1955), 46.
[3] ibid, p.46
[4] Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity, (* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U P, 1991), 91
[5] Peter L. Berger, "The Socialist Myth", *Public Interest,* v.44 (1976)
[6] Boris Groys, "The Birth of Socialist Realism from the Spirit of the Russian Avant-Garde', in *Laboratory of Dreams,* John E. Bowlt and Olga Matich eds, (Stanford: Stanford U P, 1996). 206
[7] Czeslaw Milosz, *Zaraz po wojnie.* Korespondencja z pisarzami 1946 -1960, (Wydawnictwo Znak, Krakow, 1998), 237
[8] Aleksander Wat, Dzwniek b*ez samoglosek, (*Polonia, London, 1986), l l.
Andrzej Siemek, Translator Preface to: Claude-Prosper Jolyot de Crebillon, *Sofa,* Panstwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa, 198 7, pp 30-31
[10] Ewa Berberyusz, ,Jeficy Ob6r", *Plus-Minus, no.* 49, weekly supplement to *Rzeczpospolita,* 29-30 November, 1997 [11] See Andrew V. Ettin, *Literature and the Pastoral,* (Yale U P, New Haven and London, 1984), 77, passim .
[12] Renato Poggioli, 'The Oaten Flute'; *Harvard Library Bulletin,* Cambridge, Mass., vol XI,no.2, Spring 1957 in George MacDonald, ed *The Viking Book of Aphorism.* A Personal Selection by W.H. Auden and Louis Kronenberger, Dorset Press, 1981, p.3615

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