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Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy. In Search of the Philosopher's Contemporary Masks*

We can probably agree with the general thesis that today the "lover of wisdom" is viewed by the public as a somewhat suspicious figure.

Let us not be deceived by a nice reference to suspicion – and the title of "masters of suspicion" proposed by Paul Ricoeur to characterize Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud. It does not mean that as contemporary philosophers we want to apply to join this circle, that we claim the right to be masters of suspicion, treading out the paths set out by these three, but that we are just in popular understanding, in the simplest sense *suspicious*, i.e. uncertain, inaccurate, strange, maybe a little dangerous.

The contemporary philosopher fits into the triangular field marked out by *abstractiveness*, *superfluity*, and *amusingness*. Abstractiveness touches the philosopher in two ways: because he himself often escapes into pure abstraction, but also because, as it is commonly believed, he belongs to an endangered or even extinct species, and is less and less common in nature. His image becomes mythologized and is particularly exposed to the prey of stereotypes and deeply false imaginaries, the oldest model of which is the classic parody of the philosopher Socrates from the comedy *The Clouds* by Aristophanes.

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The second element – *superfluity* – is primarily a cultural superfluity, which is to some extent confirmed by the temptation to ask the question whether anybody still needs philosophy today. There are many who would like to claim that the philosopher's place has long since been taken by more talkative, productive, credible, and active "world describers". This is particularly evident in the degradation of what was once autonomous and is nowadays spread over other disciplines of philosophical language – these days its classical concepts are extremely de-philosophized: the 'atom' was snatched from under philosophers' noses by physicists, the 'substance' by chemists, the 'character' by psychologists, the 'polis' by political scientists, and the 'cogito' by cognitive scientists.

The stereotypical *abstractiveness* of philosophy and cultural *superfluity* ultimately culminates in *amusingness*. Philosophers, despite centuries of titanic struggles to discover the truth, goodness and beauty, have been pushed to the same side track that is inhabited by all sorts of absent-minded, unrealistic aesthetes: poets, dreamers, and other eccentrics. The contrast between the ambitions, aspirations and seriousness of the goals of the great philosophical systems and today's failures of these unrealized projects, as well as wider cultural marginalization in superfluity, make philosophers, as well as this whole bunch of aesthetes, *amusing* – that is to say, *comical*, although – a cold comfort – in a slightly mitigated form. They are not simply ridiculous, rather – *funny*, like clumsy, but nonetheless consistently tolerated children, though perhaps it would be better to say: amusing, absent-minded, clumsy, and old-fashioned grandparents and grandmothers. Or maybe like clowns.

Of course, by referring to the figure of the clown and, at the same time, complaining about the fall of the noble image of the philosopher, we let ourselves be entrapped, whether we like it or not, in the classic opposition by Leszek Kołakowski – of *priests and jesters*. However, in this case, I want to clearly oppose both the pastoral tone and avoid an easy admission to the party of jesters. The concept I want to articulate here is also a rejection of pure clownery, although appearances may be misleading. Let me therefore draw a slightly different portrait of the philosopher, wearing masks that are much more suited to him today.

The trouble is that the general outline of the portrait, which is in fact a combination of four different characters, is already from the beginning, clownish. It feeds on inspiration laced with poaching and/or robbery. The quadruple figure, which I am proposing, can be reduced to the following tetrade: *a tinker*, *a tailor*, *a soldier*, *and a spy*. Of course, it has not only been brazenly borrowed, but also completely detached from the meaning of the original. Experienced experts in spy

literature have certainly recognized the title of the novel by John le Carré, which carries a certain graceful quasi-poetic rhythm: *tinker*, *tailor*, *soldier*, *spy*.[1]

What's clownish or jesterish about it? And what is not in mixing the orders of popular culture and philosophical reflection? And if it is not even clownery, it is certainly pure sophism – to take any elegant expression and repeat it to the delight of the mob, giving the impression of depth and philosophical power. Paulo Coelho would certainly be proud of us today.

However, before you reject the concept, please allow it to be heard in full. Perhaps it will reveal some area for more serious reflection.

Let me start my study in a slightly reversed order, with the figure of *the soldier*.

Over half a century ago Henryk Elzenberg, who, together with Tadeusz Czeżowski, is particularly esteemed in Toruń, made a famous comment about philosophy:

> 4 October 1951. The state of philosophy is a state of war. Let us not allow ourselves to be deluded by appearances: the relations between philosophers can be as courteous as possible, nevertheless, they are a fight, a fight for the worldview, and thus for life. Whoever does not defend himself in this fight, i.e. does not attack, dies: his own face is taken away from him and he is taken off the face of the earth.[2]

Of course, this is not the time to develop the thread of philosophy as a fight and to enter into a direct discussion with the author of *The Trouble with Existence*,[3] even though the situation of today's alleged marginalization of philosophy is asking for it. For shouldn't philosophers more actively protest against their defeat in the – aptly named – "fight" for the rule over souls? In other words, maybe they should openly confront physicists, biologists, psychologists, or cognitive scientists and claim what "belongs" to them? Such a question certainly appears in the heads of many contemporary thinkers.

However, what raises my doubts is the very rhetoric of direct confrontation, which is not best suited to contemporary forms of thinking and communication. Elzenberg's polemical radicalism, perhaps picked up from the trenches of the Great War, in which he fought as a legionary, cultivated by his disciples, Zbigniew Herbert or, in a way, Bogusław

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[1] John le Carré, *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1974).

[2] Henryk Elzenberg, *Kłopot z istnieniem. Aforyzmy w porządku czasu* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, 2002), 393.

[3] In *The Trouble with Existence* Elzenberg refers to the concept of fighting at least a dozen times, both literally and metaphorically (fighting for what is good, fighting with weakness).

Wolniewicz, seems a bit anachronistic today, although I must admit that I am formulating this judgment with great caution. What is perhaps more important is that other, softer, though not necessarily more noble, strategies seem to be simply more effective – in this sense, the poacher and clownish camp-follower which the philosopher is turning into today can do more than a noble swordsman or paladin of truth, a priestly epigone of the era of Philosophy, whose serious and important classical tirade nobody wants to listen to. If, however, I weave a rough thread (a twine?) into my carpet portrait of the soldier, it is to maintain the bravery and determination of philosophers, which the soldier, in turn, definitely has in excess. Without an unbreakable soldier's faith in the sense of fighting and – perhaps distant – but somehow still possible victory – we, philosophers, would have long since given the grounds to other stories. So glory to the soldiers-philosophers!

Even if the era of the militant philosopher-*soldier* is slowly passing (and here comes to my eyes the respectable figure of the founder of Polish Philosophical Society – Kazimierz Twardowski in his officer's boots), philosophers still remain turned to the past of their field and do not resign their old toys to the lumber room of ideas as willingly as others. However, their need to change this approach is claimed by the second character, which I would like to use here. It is the *tailor* who appears in a proverb that is so significant in the context of the situation of philosophy: "the tailor must cut the coat according to the cloth". This folk wisdom is the purest appeal in philosophy for practical reason, abandonment of the old illusions about great philosophical systems, and today's dreams of the hegemony of philosophy in culture, dreams of its priesthood – there is not enough "cloth" for this, because you have to "do what you can with the scraps". But the job still has to be done, it has to be undertaken on conditions that we did not choose, because they were imposed on us. So instead of, as Elzenberg wishes, fighting – among ourselves or side by side for philosophy with an " external" enemy – let's accept the situation and take on the more than soldierly, humble attitude of a tailor.

It is also worth remembering that not every tailor is a cheapjack who only cuts old rags. He can manage with better fabric, but he can also turn it inside out and sew it again, so that stitches are not visible. Wasn't that how Thomas Aquinas sewed up the scholastic and antique tradition? And today, aren't such "stitches" needed by engineers designing autonomous cars? Suddenly, they discover that without advanced logic, but also without the help of ethics, they will not solve the problems related to the decision making process of artificial intelligence using algorithms, in the face of threats to the lives of passengers and other traffic participants. Perhaps such a tailor would be able to provide psychologists who have just invented positive psychology and the category of virtue, with

such a piece of fabric as would remind them of ancient concepts, so that they would not have to reinvent this virtue as they do unknowingly.

That is the lesson from the tailor.

Now, the *tinker*. This word does not immediately reveal its meaning, because the original one got lost somewhere in the times when people soldered and wired pots, and the door-to-door handymen, wandering from house to house, sharpened knives and scissors. The original *tinker*, even greater than the tailor using scraps and slivers, brings out the meaning of such activities as 'tinkering', 'picking', 'repairing', or 'patching together'. Shouldn't a philosopher become such a tinker today? He is still one of the few who is ready to review the old and supposedly worn-out historical tools – that is, old ideas, concepts, hastily abandoned notions: he can assess their usefulness. In a more general plan, philosophy itself seems to be such a tool today.

Next, the tinker-philosopher is ready not only to repair many old and supposedly outdated, unfashionably obsolete story-tools, but also to turn them inside out like coats, with simple craftsmanship but precise procedures. In this way, these stories look like new and become useful once again (You can see that at this point the tinker bows to the tailor, thanking him for suggesting the metaphor of "turning it inside out"). Tinkering and soldering the dusty stories about Aristotle, Marcus Aurelius, Augustine, John Scotus Eriugena, Kierkegard, or Bergson is not just an expression of nostalgia for the past of thought, inevitably fading into nothingness, and a sign of a lack of willingness to accept this fading into the past and simply throw all these old pots away. This is an important lesson in do-it-yourself, which we can learn from the tinker: old pots can still be used, rusty knives can be sharpened, and even the oldest items can be used in new and efficient ways.

The word *lumber room* – in Polish *lamus* – used here is already instructive, offering yet another lesson of prudence and lack of thoughtlessness in referring to the lumber room of supposedly outdated philosophical tales. Although it is of German origin,[4] it has a beautiful native equivalent – the old Polish word 'kleć', from which the term already used here 'klecić' ("to patch together") is derived (and what could be a better place to emphasize the richness of the Polish language than the assembly of the Polish Philosophical Society!). The term 'kleć' was used to describe a primitive farmstead or a place where farm animals were kept; in other words, a shed, a shack, a closet, *a casula*, *a tabernum*, *a tugurium*, or just

[4] The Polish word *lamus* ('lumber room') comes from the middle high German word *lēm-hūs*, meaning house or clay house (just like 'kleć'!). Later on, it will mean a lumber room or a farm building for storing grain, armour, documents and valuables. See Stanisław Dubisz (ed.), *Uniwersalny słownik języka polskiego* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2006), vol. K–Ó, 397.

a poorly-made shed, a dilapidated house, *structura temporaria*.[5] Yes, there is a lot of poverty, mediocrity and improvisation in these synonymous expressions. But a well-educated philosopher, equipped and trained in the precision of speech, clarity of argumentation, and responsibility for judgments can handle this apparent mediocrity and makeshift.

Thus spoke the tinker.

And finally, the last figure, by far the most morally suspicious – the *spy*, if not a "collaborator of the secret police". The spy is the disguised, shadowy, deceitful, and dishonorable opposite of a noble soldier. The soldier may be brave and righteous, but the spy can be overwhelmingly effective.

It is from this figure that the most serious inspiration for philosophers flows, so that instead of fighting for the shrinking domain of classical *Philosophy*, they can fundamentally change their strategy: just like a spy or a poacher, they can bravely walk on foreign property, freely and with impunity benefit from the fruits of someone else's work, easily avoiding methodologies or research field borders of other disciplines and, above all, admit that in general, philosophers, *as* poachers and spies, *are allowed more*. After all, they are the outlaws of today's culture, which is deprived of philosophy. In such conditions, their most effective weapon and the strongest shield is the fact that they are (seemingly) harmless, because – just like jesters – they are only *amusing* now. It is, of course, an illusion – under the jester's mask there is a sharpened sense of observation, precision of thinking, careful argumentation. And when the unsuspecting victim, confronted by the spy armed by the tinker, starts to realize that these are only masks, it will be far too late: the philosopher-soldier will strike a deadly blow, and the tailor will sew it all together in such a way that no trace will be left.

And only the echoes will still carry the empty cackle of those who had just laughed at the amusing philosopher.

[5] *Słownik polszczyzny XVI wieku*, vol. X (Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków–Gdańsk: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wydawnictwo Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 1975), 347.