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Krzysztof Michalski as Educator

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Abstract: A reflection on the late Krzysztof Michalski (1948-2013) as a teacher and intellectual, written by a former student.

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I have been hesitating for some time to gather my thoughts about Krzysztof under the above title, for a number of reasons. I do not want to pretend to play Nietzsche to Krzysztof's Schopenhauer; the comparison would be absurd, for reasons that I think reflect rather well on both Krzysztof and myself. Socially, at least, we have both lived reasonably well-adjusted lives, despite being philosophers. Nor do I wish to indulge my narcissism—recall Nietzsche's confession in *Ecce Homo* that the essay alluded to in the above title was in fact more about himself than about Schopenhauer, so more about Nietzsche as educator. The comparison also fails on a personal level; the immanence of Nietzsche's reflection in his untimely essay is secured by the fact that he never met Schopenhauer. I knew Krzysztof personally, and for an important—I would even say decisive—period my education actually took shape under his guidance, and was inspired by his example.

What motivates the title, and why it still stands (however wobbly), is a wish to evoke Nietzsche's description of the cultural need that someone like Schopenhauer promises to address. The need is for a renewed confidence, even faith, not so much in ideas as in our personal capacity to pursue ideas. This need

becomes acute in an environment where the life of the mind has become more and more dominated by a busy but inane intellectual professionalism, and philosophy in particular burdened by a regime of scholarship that too often embodies only the most superficial of values, masking a hollowness and poverty of spirit. The problem of what it means to personally devote oneself to the cultivation of ideas in a world in which ideas are rapidly becoming the trivial products of an industry that still calls itself a university—this is the problem of education, made all the more pressing by the fatuousness of the modern university so wonderfully mocked by Nietzsche in his meditation, that I wanted to evoke to describe Krzysztof Michalski as educator.

In Nietzsche's hands, the question of an educator is accordingly a personal one; or rather, it has no real sense unless we see it in personal terms. I cannot write about Krzysztof as a teacher in any other way, so please indulge me a little history.

I first took courses with Krzysztof at Boston University beginning in 1990. The seminars were intense, challenging, unrelenting in spirit, though not without the occasional flashes of humor. I think it is safe to say that, had Krzysztof lacked a sense of humor,

he would have been a particularly terrifying teacher. Humor was in fact deeply important to Krzysztof; he would often describe his occasional trips back to Poland as an opportunity to recuperate, regenerate his strength, and that essential to all that was catching up on the latest jokes, which he would rave about but which, of course, did not translate into English. You only know what a limitation it is not to know a language when you lose someone who speaks, and lives in it—then what was once merely a limitation suddenly becomes a loss.

The seminars were always focused, always productive; but the most important thing is what they were not: they were never workshops for the production of footnotes, the proselytizing of one scholarly faction or the debasement of another, or the recruitment of disciples to help generate that professorial aura that functions as an important currency of influence in the academic world. Though the manner Krzysztof would carry himself as a professor stood in stark contrast to many of the academic mores that guide professional scholars in the production of their reputations, he was not completely out of place in such an environment—he could for example name-drop anyone under the table, and I have seen him put to shame many who held themselves to be well-connected. But he was certainly different. Some found this liberating, others found it irritating; to me he rapidly became an intellectual oasis.

However important the seminars were to my education, they pale in importance to Krzysztof's invitation to visit the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM) in Vienna as a Junior Visiting Fellow in the second semester of my graduate studies. Since it was only my first year in the program, it was clearly far too early for me to be given a fellowship; but I had proven myself intelligent enough that I would probably not prove to be an embarrassment. So in one fell swoop I was taken out of a rather ordinary American academic program and thrown into a remarkable intellectual world that, to risk a cliché, shaped the very way that I perceive the world. The transformations of 1989 still underway in Europe, IWM was the site of a dizzying variety of discussions about history, economic transformation, social revolution, and yes, even philosophy that had become suddenly animated by contemporary events. Having been turned to philosophy through phenomenology and, thanks to Erazim Kohak, my understanding of phenomenology having been shaped through an intense engagement with Jan Patočka, I even felt that I had some stake in the questions under debate, as opposed to being a simple American tourist

watching the show.

My experiences during those first six months at IWM also revealed to me something about Krzysztof as an intellectual in general, and a philosopher in particular. There was a reason why narrow concerns about the mechanics of academic advancement were absent in the seminars: Krzysztof was operating under very different assumptions about the institutional possibilities of intellectual life. He was convinced it was possible—and together with the rest of the leadership at IWM, showed that it is in fact possible—to carve out spaces that can afford the time, freedom, and independence that allow for a genuine exchange of ideas, an authentic cultivation of perspectives. IWM is a place that suspends, just enough, the more pernicious effects of the rank divisions among junior and senior faculty, as well as the social isolation of academic from non-academic intellectuals, or researchers from policy makers, opening the way for often unexpected patterns of intellectual cooperation. Anyone having doubts that there was any room in the academic world for the creation of communities—even if transitory—where ideas are actually thought through in a spirit of honest discovery and creativity, can only find a powerful source of inspiration at IWM.

At the same time it began to become clear to me, a clarity that only grew over the years, that Krzysztof's commitment to IWM was not a function of choosing a practical at the expense of a theoretical approach to intellectual life. It is certainly true that he spent an enormous amount of his time and energy on the administrative and political side of things IWM, but at the same time he always remained in tune with the manner in which a whole host of apparently different kinds of discussions, debates, and controversies were relevant to a basic, fundamental call to reflect on the meaning of the human condition. Krzysztof, in other words, always remained a philosopher, even as he was pulled, at times willingly but sometimes not, into the politics of his native Poland, or into the endless work of securing the position and clout of IWM in the Viennese and Austrian landscapes of influence.

Though there are many differences, I believe that Krzysztof shared a lot in common on this score with Patočka, another genuine philosopher consistently drawn out of his books to address a more public need for reflection. Both were, in ways that are all too uncommon, genuine Europeans—each a patriot, of Poland and Czecho-Slovakia respectively, but at the same time committed to the spirit of Europe as a task,

an ideal. Krzysztof liked to tell the story of a visit to Prague, when Patočka took him on a personal tour of the city; I have often reflected on this story since learning of Krzysztof's death, since it seems to promise so much: the aging philosopher, not long before his own death, leading the younger through the streets of a decaying, ancient capital with its ghosts of empires and wars, revolutions and defeats, reflecting on what Europe was and what it could be. It's easy to romanticize this too much, of course; but it is clear that both represent an important form of a specifically philosophical calling, for which reflection is something that is pursued in order to shape the world, not avoid it.

The intensity of the seminars, the introduction to a genuine cosmopolitan philosophical life, the vibrant sense of taking part in an emerging understanding of history as it unfolds—all this was pretty heady stuff for a first year graduate student. It made ideas something concrete, and also something personal, or rather it brought to the fore how ideas are in fact inseparable from concrete existence, from the lives that we actually live. The lesson is a simple one, but not at all easy to teach. The concreteness of ideas also means that philosophy, if this is what we want to call a life in ideas, is not always an easy thing, for it often becomes entangled in our self-delusions, our unfounded hopes, our vanities and passions; more, it means that ideas are tied up with our history, including everything in our history that is painful.

I learned something about this during a seminar co-taught by Krzysztof and an elderly scholar (whom out of respect I will not name) on the subject of Carl Schmitt. Krzysztof had only recently discovered Schmitt at the time and was working through Schmitt's texts with characteristic rigor. In the course of the seminar, however, it became clear that the elderly scholar in question had no interest in Schmitt as a philosopher: his aim in teaching the seminar was solely to discredit Schmitt, as a response to the popular revival that Schmitt's work was enjoying at the time, especially with regard to his critique of democracy. His interest in attacking Schmitt was rooted in a profound sense of betrayal: he was of roughly the same generation as Schmitt's, and considered him to be nothing more than a traitor whose work should be treated with contempt.

I was rather irked by this, and what I took then to be rather dismissive and shallow criticisms offered up by this scholar, which contrasted so strongly against Krzysztof's enthusiasm and penetrating engagements with the text. At the time I took to heart (and still do)

Krzysztof's oft repeated principle, learned from Hans-Georg Gadamer no less, that one can only understand a philosopher if one first assumes that the position is true; this is not simply a question of intellectual generosity, but fundamentally one of the dynamic of understanding. But understanding has its risks; in the case of this seminar, risk flowered into outright hostility, which threatened to undermine the integrity of the exercise.

I take this to be a basic truth, one that I learned to see as a student of Krzysztof: any commitment to ideas is of one piece with a commitment to the trust, confidence, and respect of others, because real thinking is potentially dangerous, and it has its risks. This means that a key part of education must be the conscious cultivation of a willingness to be flexible, forgiving, open to seeing why it is that we argue what we do, believe in what we believe, despite how messy the reasons are. I have tried to carry this over into my teaching, and certainly to my advising; but it has perhaps proven most valuable when grappling with the many disappointments and contradictions of academic life, as well as keeping the joys and successes in perspective. All the narrowness, pettiness, and absurdity wrought by academic professionalization that Nietzsche mocks so well is still with us, and the university as an idea, a purpose, is I would argue very much in crisis—a crisis that perhaps represents one of the most important challenges we face with regard to the contemporary spiritual landscape. Yet for all that the game is not up, what is at stake in these questions is being experienced in a manifold of very human encounters with the legacy of ideas, with the vocation of the scholar, and with the hopes and desires of each of us—and there is a profound beauty in even the limited, passion-ridden, difficult, absurd character of these encounters.

Isn't this ultimately the kind of awareness that Krzysztof expresses on a more sophisticated philosophical register in his last book, *The Flame of Eternity*, and by extension why Nietzsche became such an important philosopher in his eyes? How else could we read a chapter with the title "Reason, Which Hurts"? This deeply personal book on almost every page expresses the profound urgency of existence, of the potential for life to break free from its fetters, and the pain and suffering that must entail, and not just for the great, for those who seem to be running the world, but for each of us, each life as a being in time, a being weaving together the fragile fabric of the world.

There are of course aspects of Krzysztof that I

never understood at all. The question of religious faith always represented a certain divide between us, one that sometimes had an impact, never negative but at times ambiguous, on our philosophical relationship. A couple of years ago in conversation I made the comment to the effect that the past is full of forgotten lives, that the overwhelming majority of those who have lived become part of an anonymous mass that constitutes a fundamental feature of the specifically human past. I had meant to say something about the frailty of human

existence, of its profound dependence on a capacity to remember that, tragically, cannot possibly succeed, and meant to express with that something of a strange beauty in it all. But here Krzysztof simply rejected the very idea – no one, for him, is ever forgotten.

The discussion was inconclusive. I am still quite certain that I will be forgotten. But I will always remember Krzysztof Michalski, the *Erzieher*, with the deepest gratitude and respect, and miss him as a friend.