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Purity, Dirt, and the Chaos of Revolution: On the Two Pars of Przedwiośnie.

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Purity, Dirt, and the Chaos of Revolution: On the Two Parts of *Przedwiośnie*¹

Houses of glass and cesspools

In the two most important novels written after the independence, Stefan Żeromski's *Przedwiośnie* and Andrzej Strug's *Pokolenie Marka Świdy*, and in numerous other works of the period,² the protagonist always returns or makes his way with difficulty to Poland from the East. This version of the Odysseus topos³ had a special importance, I believe: the power to structure the nascent Polish state. The return constitutes the crossing of the border and consequently reassures its presence, and consolidates the vision of the new state as clearly separated from revolutionary barbarity. The direction of the journey, invariably from the East, points to the most important Other in relation to whom, or against whom, collective identity constitutes itself.⁴

¹ This article is a modified version of "Czystość, brud i granice. O konstruowaniu rzeczywistości społecznej w *Przedwiośniu*," awaiting publication in a volume of essays from the conference *Dwudziestolecie 1918–1939: odkrycia – fascynacje – zaprzeczenia* at the Polish Department, University of Warsaw, November 18–19, 2008.

² Especially by Jerzy Bandrowski (for example, *Przez jasne wrota*, Wydawnictwo Polskie, Lwów, 1920); Ferdynand Ossendowski (for example *Przez kraj ludzi, bogów i zwierząt*, Gebethner i Wolff, Warsaw, 1923); see also the novel by Andrzej Strug, *Mogila nieznanego żołnierza* (Ignis, Poznań, 1922). I am referring only to a fraction of texts in which this pattern is visible.

³ J. Kwiatkowski, *Dwudziestolecie międzywojenne*, PWN, Warsaw, 2003, 213–4.

⁴ I am making a tentative assumption, which I will develop in the course of the argument. The first movement in the formation of a new individual or collective identity depends on drawing boundaries, on differentiating the I (us) from the not-I (not-us).

Contemporary anthropology alerts us to one of the aspects of shaping the symbolic boundary. In the works of Mary Douglas and Julia Kristeva (who draws inspiration from some of the aspects of Douglas' work) the division of the inside and the outside is based on the opposition between purity and pollution. In short, in the analysis of cultures offered by Douglas and Kristeva, purity is synonymous with the ordered world, while dirt signifies amorphousness, decay, and chaos; the latter situates itself at the outskirts of "our" reality, which is in the process of being created, or has already been tamed and is continually threatened by the invasion of the impure.⁵

Prose written in the first period after independence leaves no doubt which side the powers of entropy reside on. The revolution in the memoirs of Zofia Kossak-Szczuczka, *Pożoga*, also stains the heritage of the Polish landowning elites of eastern Poland, the so-called *Kresy*, which is suggestively emphasized by the images of devastated and polluted manors, with excrement covering the floors. In *Pożoga*, the turning of the mansions into outhouses has a symbolic meaning: it is a way in which one "shows contempt for the place" and its former owners.⁶ The unfulfilled vision of the entry of the Polish troops into her native Wołyń, on the other hand, is enveloped in an aura of luminosity: "Oh, for that moment! We will dress our children in white and for the first time this year will take them to church. I wish I could also wear white for that moment."⁷

A very similar contrasting juxtaposition of images shapes the meaning of the first part of *Przedwiośnie*, which, as the scholars of this work by Żeromski suspect, was written on the basis of reports by repatriates from the South of the former tsarist

This process is based on dichotomization and, consequently, a selection of one significant Other, who becomes the source of negative identification. The stronger the shared emotions inspired by the Other are, the greater his ability to homogenize the new community. See M. Jarymowicz, "Tożsamość jako efekt rozpoznawania się wśród obcych," in: *Tożsamość a odmienność kulturowa*, ed. P. Boski, M. Jarymowicz, H. Malewska-Peyre, Wydawnictwo Instytutu Psychologii PAN, Warsaw, 1992.

⁵ I am using works key to the anthropology of (im)purity: M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Taylor, 2002; J. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Columbia University Press, 1982. I do not care for an orthodox application of Kristeva's and Douglas' theory in the reading of *Przedwiośnie*. I only draw inspiration from their work. A theoretical approach which refers to the symbolic meaning of impurity is used in historical-literary analysis by: M. Sugiera, "Leworęczna i wilkołak. 'Inny' w dramatach Lubkiewicz-Urbanowicz," *Teksty Drugie*, 1999, no 5; K. Kłosińska, *Fantazmaty: Grabiński, Prus, Zapolska*, Wydawnictwo UŚ, Katowice, 2004; in art criticism by: P. Leszkowicz, *Helen Chadwick: ikonografia podmiotowości*, Aureus, Cracow, 2001; M. Bakke, *Ciało otwarte: filozoficzne reinterpretacje kulturowych wizji cielesności*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Instytutu Filozofii UAM, Poznań, 2000; and in historical-social anthropology by: J. Frydman, O. Löfgren, *Narodziny człowieka kulturalnego. Studium z antropologii historycznej szwedzkiej klasy średniej*, trans. G. Sokół, Wydawnictwo Marek Derewecki, Kęty, 2007.

⁶ Z. Kossak-Szczuczka, *Pożoga, Wspomnienia z Wołynia 1917-1919*, Księgarnia Św. Jacka, Katowice, 1990, 155.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 282.

empire.⁸ In the account of the events in Baku, descriptions which bring to mind impurity are very strongly marked. The image of the bodies of people murdered during the Armenian-Tartar massacre, brought to the enormous collective graves becomes an ironic conclusion to the momentous events of the revolution. The beginning of the Bolshevik terror forces Cezary and his father, the former tsarist clerk, to meet in the most secluded places, by the sewer outlets. In *Przedwiośnie*, revolution has its intense smell: “the fetor” of decomposing bodies, the stench of excrement “which took one’s breath away,” the air in the trains carrying refugees “close and rancid” like “stupefying gasses,” and even “the stench of the poorly treated [sheep]skins” (71, 80, 117).⁹ Staring at the ships departing with the emigrants from the Black Sea port, Baryka speaks of the “open maw” of the decks and “the excrement of Russia” (42). If one gives a slightly broader significance to this image one could say that Baku, marked with bodily decay, becomes a synecdoche for the entire Empire taken over by the revolution.

This vision is juxtaposed with the dream of Poland with houses made of glass. The distinctive feature of the future Polish modern political system is to be cleanliness, which acquires its most perfect form, transparency, in the tale of the half-mad Seweryn Baryka.

Travel to Poland, when Seweryn Baryka engages in his fantastic visions, opens another possibility of interpreting the problem which is central to my reading. As the narrator, the chronicler of the journey, notes, the father who awaited the repatriate train for weeks in Kharkov “had repeated attacks of sickness” and “had to lie in a cubby hole under some stairs where he was allowed to rest during the day” (105). This allusion to the legend of Saint Alexius lends hagiographic character to the description of Seweryn Baryka (Cezary’s mother is represented in a similar manner). Subtle allusions to the religious sphere appear also at other moments of the journey: the narrator uses the term “the two travelers”; he calls Seweryn Baryka, dying on the repatriate train, “a pilgrim who himself had had to abandon his own distant destination” (113, 120). The allegorical representation of travel, which lends it the significance of a pilgrimage, implies a symbolic purity in the aim of the journey.¹⁰ Juxtaposed with the sacred, whiter-than-snow, idea of the homeland of the journeying exiles, bolshevism from the first part of the novel is but the dark power of chaos. Numerous contemporary writers and thinkers have associated communism with demonic powers.¹¹

Zeromski would surely agree with Marian Zdziechowski’s thesis expressed in his work from the 1930s that (what he saw as) the satanic quality of the Bolshevik ideology is related to its power to objectify, to reduce the world to undifferentiated matter.¹²

⁸ Z.J. Adamczyk, *Przedwiośnie. Prawda i legenda*. Oficyna Wydawnicza GiP, Poznań, 2001, 51.

⁹ S. Zeromski, *The Coming of Spring*, trans. Bill Johnston, CEU Press, 2007.

¹⁰ A. Wieczorkiewicz, *Wędrowcy fikcyjnych światów. Pielgrzym, rycerz, włóczęga, słowo/obraz/terytoria*, Gdańsk, 1996; especially “Wprowadzenie” and first chapter, “Alegoryczne peregrynacje.”

¹¹ E. Pogonowska, “Armia Antychrysta,” in: *Dziki Biesy. Wizja Rosji Sowieckiej w antybolszewickiej poezji polskiej lat 1917–1932*, Wydawnictwo UMCS, Lublin, 2002.

¹² M. Zdziechowski, “Widmo przyszłości,” in his: *Wybór Pism*, ed. M. Zaczyński, Znak, Cracow, 1993; discussion of the text: E. Pogonowska, *Armia Antychrysta*, 139.

The crossing of the Polish border must lead to disillusionment. Disappointed by the view of the mud-flooded eastern town, Baryka repeats with disenchantment: “where on earth are your houses of glass” (126). Similar images appear in the later parts of the text. Terrible dirt exudes from the descriptions of “peasant pariahs” in the Chłodek farm, and from the Jewish “trash heaps, gutters, and sewers” at Nalewki. Dirt shown in the reality of the new Poland in a naturalist way, in its literal dimension, provokes the question about the symbolic meaning of impurity, not only for establishing boundaries, but also for establishing the inner order of the new state.

In Mary Douglas’ theory, the opposition between purity and impurity performs the role of a super-guard of the social structure, creating a simplified code of fundamental rules of community living.¹³ Pure or repulsive, accepted or ruthlessly condemned, respect or disrespect for the rules which often signifies the breaking of a taboo: along these lines the norms defining a given society become morally sanctioned and acquire the status of absolute commands and prohibitions. The introduction of super-rules is in fact proof of the weakness of the rules. The tendency toward the absolute rules is characteristic of societies without a crystallized, stable order.¹⁴ And to fortify the grounds of social life with rituals or ideas of purity and pollution may suggest that those very grounds are threatened.

The title of the third part of Żeromski’s novel is an expression of the phantasms tormenting the new collectivity.¹⁵ “The Wind from the East” ignores the commands and prohibitions of absolute borders. Imperceptibly it penetrates the interior of the new state, bringing with it the miasma of the deteriorating Empire and the germs of its decomposition. The metaphors of the revolution popular at the beginning of the period between the wars (the wind or contagious disease) emphasize its transgressive role. Perhaps, however, the chaos of upheaval was present in the new state from the start as the force of the original lack of differentiation preceding and conditioning the possibility of establishing new cultural forms. The new state emerges thanks to the ferment of History, which brought down three great empires, and most likely has not disappeared with their demise.

Between 1918-1923, a wave of demonstrations and strikes erupted in Poland. Their escalation led to the bloody riots in Cracow in November 1923. It is difficult to find clear echoes of those events in the prose of the first half of the 1920s. The experience of the world threatened by social upheaval, in which “kitchens and pantries change into arsenals of live bombs,”¹⁶ penetrates into literature as an undefined anxiety. It is present in the lyrical prose of Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, although the melancholy aura of foggy Warsaw in *Hilary, syn buchaltera*, seems to euphemistically subdue, muffle, the

¹³ M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*; the chapter “Internal Lines” is devoted to this topic.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ I am interested here only in the title metaphor which was popular and resonant at the time. For comments about the elusiveness and phantasmatic character of the images of the stranger see: E. Pogonowska, “Armia Antychrysta,” 132.

¹⁶ K.H. Rostworowski, *Antychryst. Tragedia w 3 aktach*, Wydawnictwo Polskie, Lviv, 1925, 101.

revolutionary anxieties, making them present only in the form of vague allusion.¹⁷ In Władysław Reymont's novel *Bunt zwierząt* [Animal Mutiny], which attempts to give the real sense of threat a universalizing form of the parable, outlines of typical Polish realities emerge. The manor against which the animals rise, the symbol of the power of the nobility, clearly resembles a landowner's mansion.¹⁸ The power of the social fear animates also the phantasms of the bloody peasant uprising and the anti-national myth of Jakub Szela.¹⁹

The first part of *Przedwiośnie* points to the most important mechanisms of constructing the new collective identity. The creation of the symbolic border determines the sense of "Szkłane domy." This border, however, does not protect from internal danger. The impure, the tainted with chaos, may be revealed anywhere, violating the rules which regulate reality and disrupting the cohesion of novelistic narration. In *Przedwiośnie*, this impurity is present where it would be least expected.

"Nawłóć," or anxiety

The war of 1920 is represented in Żeromski's novel by a mere few episodes, maintained in the "deadly" style of reports from the front. In the second part of the text, the author moves the action to a landowner's manor located on the periphery of great events. The significance of this move in a novel which attempts to represent the most important problems of the reality of the early 1920s remains unclear. "Nawłóć" escapes a coherent reading and its historical and historical-literary interpretation is marked by ambivalence. Among the most important of those difficulties²⁰ are: the fact that the presence of this, most impressive, section of the novel is not justified by the novel's compositional logic and the fact that the praise of the beauty of life on the land is cou-

¹⁷ Such an allusion is contained, for example, in one of the descriptions of the cityscape: "All of Warsaw in the fog, in the fog. The fall draping itself despairingly on the great homesteads, the roaming of the crowds in the brown confinement with no expansion of any horizon, *those uneasy dreams of the black human masses* [emphasis mine, Ł.P.] wandering down Nowy Świat, Długa, Nalewki, Chmielna, and Marszałkowska. The anxiety of pale lamps when the fog drowns them and the only exit toward the broken bridge. A dead-end road." (J. Iwaszkiewicz, *Hilary syn buchaltera*, Czytelnik, Warsaw, 1975, 16; first edition in 1923. [trans, KM])

¹⁸ "The missus ran in from her rooms, the young master came with a rifle, the young mistress with dolls in her hands, and two red dachshunds appeared wriggling like snakes." (W. Reymont, *Bunt*, Fronda, Warszawa, 2004, 10; first edition 1924. [trans. KM]) The description seems stereotypical, using images strongly embedded in the Polish imagination.

¹⁹ That is the case also in the works by Żeromski, for example *Turoń. Dramat w trzech aktach* (J. Mortkowicz, Warsaw, 1923).

²⁰ Two most popular critical texts related to the novel, both of which had several editions, emphasize these difficulties: Artur Hutnikiewicz's *Przedwiośnie Stefana Żeromskiego* (Państwowe Zakłady Wydawnictw Szkolnych, Warsaw, 1971) and Henryk Markiewicz's "Przedwiośnie" Stefana Żeromskiego (Czytelnik, Warsaw, 1965).

pled with a sharp critique of the landed gentry (the Old Polish word “nawłóć” means “a weed,” the fact which is frequently emphasized by post-1945 readers of the novel).

“Nawłóć” also does not fit the formula of the realistic novel if, in the case of *Przedwiośnie*, we establish the reality of the beginning of the 1920s as the criterion. As Artur Hutnikiewicz argues, the existence of the Nawłóć arcadia, a land of plenty, was improbable at the time. As he further demonstrates, Żeromski must have taken the image of the world of the landed gentry from his memories of the time when he worked as a tutor at the manors in Szulmierz, Oleśnica, and Łysowo.²¹ Żeromski’s private mythology is strongly connected to the national mythology. The world of manorial Nawłóć is a conscious reference to Soplicowo, the archetypical model of Polishness.²² The 20th century copy of the 19th century Soplicowo, however, refuses to faithfully imitate the original. A play with convention and its ironic overstatement is very perceptible in “Nawłóć.” The scene from *Pan Tadeusz* when Tadeusz sees Zosia wearing the morning, informal attire, so full of subtle eroticism, in Żeromski’s work turns into a description of Cezary “enjoying the sight of this young beauty in her undress” as “she lifted up her already diminutive little nightshirt” (170).

Such parodic repetition, which situates a traditional model in an updated context familiar to the author, suggests a historical reading of that model.²³ Irony in the second part of *Przedwiośnie* seems to have double significance. To begin with, it gives some of the characters a subtly reflective character, an awareness of their role²⁴, so that they are no longer the naïve inhabitants of this sanctuary of instinctual Polishness.²⁵ Then, as it brackets or undermines the idyllic image of the world of Nawłóć, it opens the text to what is different in this world, perhaps unconsciously revealed. My analysis below is an attempt to develop those two interpretive clues.

²¹ A. Hutnikiewicz, *Przedwiośnie Stefana Żeromskiego*, 47-8.

²² Such references in the text are very explicit (“Cezary Baryka was interrupted in his reverie like Tadeusz Soplica after his arrival in the country.” 169) Heryk Markiewicz closely attends to the Nawłóć-Soplicowo parallel (“*Przedwiośnie*” *Stefana Żeromskiego*, 12-14).

²³ Obviously I am aware of the ironical, historical and stylized quality which permeates also Mickiewicz’s description of the culture of Polish gentry. Yet in *Pan Tadeusz* those qualities are signaled much more subtly and appear not to violate the essential core of the world of Soplicowo.

²⁴ One could speculate, for example, whether the always silent Maciejunio is really the faithful masters’ servant, the master of ceremonies modeled on Wojski, or whether he only performs such a character. For example, in one of the scenes we see him in the hat of the French *maitre de hotel*, which would suggest that the kindly Maciejunio is no stranger to the awareness of stylization, mask, and role.

²⁵ Dariusz Gawin writes about the “instinctual Polishness” of Nawłóć in one of the latest interpretations of the novel (“Polska, wieczny romans Żeromskiego” in: *Polska, wieczny romans*, Wydawnictwo DANTE, Cracow, 2005, 117). If the phrase was not used ironically, it would be difficult to agree with it.

The end of the long-lasting paradigm of the culture of the nobility is first recognized in *Pan Tadeusz*, whose author concludes the descriptions of characters and customs with the epithet “the last.” Mickiewicz’s epos, however, still describes the world which inspires ontological trust. In Soplicowo everything is still in its place. A similar conviction in “Nawłóć” stated *expressis verbis* – “Here, everything was in its place, well established and safely safeguarded” (156) – suggests only empty stylization. In *Przedwiośnie*, the world of noble arcadia lacks the static and unchangeable form which lends *Pan Tadeusz* its epic majesty. Instead, the world may be symbolically represented with the horses’ gallop. The dynamic scenes of riding the britzka, the cabriolet, and on horseback, take up many pages of the novel. Drawing on the youthful memories of the author, the narrator does not want to lag behind the characters in their ecstatic experience of the world. An autobiographical confession finds its way into the novel: “What words can describe the joy of healthy young people being taken by devilish strong horses to a ball of the Polish gentry!” (245).

As important, or even more important, than the scenes of wild rides are the descriptions of spectacular falls. Already Baryka’s arrival in Nawłóć is marked by the overturning of the equipage: “its wheels spun convulsively, while the travelers were ejected as if from a slingshot” (144). A sudden dash of the horses urged with a whip makes the priest and Karusia fall off the bench in a britzka: “In a synchronized movement she and the priest had tumbled from the swinging seat straight into the empty back of the britzka,” Miss Karolina exposing her underwear in the process (198). In both descriptions the narrator strongly emphasizes the moment of the throwing off balance, the displacement of the characters. The “spasmodic” motion of the slowing down wheels of the equipage seems to disrupt the anecdotal character of the account, suddenly introducing a dramatic and menacing tone. The descriptions of the falls may suggest that the experience of the instability and uncertainty of the world constitutes the other side of the ebullient life of the Nawłóć arcadia. It appears that the grand presentation of the lives of the gentry takes place on a wobbly stage which does not offer a sense of stability and is continually threatened with disillusionment and exposure of what should remain hidden.

In Nawłóć one encounters many characters dispossessed of their social role and the cultural form related to it, in other words, displaced. Father Anastazy croons frivolous French songs and fondly reminisces about his visit to Paris. At the ball in Odolany he parades around in a priestly “skirt” instead of a “full-length cassock” (244). Since he returned from the army, Jędrek the stable-boy came down with lordliness. In each gesture, in his tone of voice and smile, he imitates the young master Hipolit. Imitation, one may assume, is here not a sign of servile admiration. Such reading would ignore the sphere of the newly awoken aspirations of the stable-boy who, upon returning from his service with the officers, has outgrown the role assigned to him in Nawłóć. Fond of repeating words used by people from the higher spheres, such as “relatively,” “perchance,” and “utterly,” Jędrek (even if not fully consciously) posits lordliness as a type of knowledge or art one can master. The ultimate consequence of such a way of thinking would be a total denaturalization of the hierarchical social order of Nawłóć

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traditionally based on birth into the position of privilege. Jędrzek's comic behavior is, as Baryka foresees, very dangerous, for it carries a subversive revolutionary potential.

The premonition of the tragedy of the Nawłóć manor torments Cezary with obsessive nightmarish visions. They appear in the text as interior monologues:

When will the abominable day come when this Jędrzek will find the courage and the strength to grab the young master by the throat and smash him in the gob, alternatively in the mug? Is he capable of letting in the poor of the surrounding villages so they can finally see what's in there, what there is in that drawing room, in the middle of the old manor house that's more inaccessible and mysterious to the crowd than the church in Nawłóć?" (176-7)

They are visible also in the catastrophic speeches made in alcoholic stupor:

He put his arm around Hipolit in a drunken embrace and whispered earnestly in his ear:

"Be on your guard, my friend! Keep your eyes open! For that silver cigarette case of yours alone, for the sake of a few silver spoons, those same people, believe me, the same people, Maciejunio and Wojciunio, Szymek and Walek, and even that Józio – Józio! – they'll drag you out into the garden and cut your head off with an ax!" (156)

Those images return at the moments when the protagonist is separated from the world: in deep thought or alcoholic stupor, when the commonsense perception of reality is impaired. They have a ghostly quality of a waking dream in which well-known people, familiar objects and spaces reveal a new and different nature. Baryka's bad premonitions resemble hallucinations, if we understand them, after Julia Kristeva, as obscure signs of something hiding under the cover of apparently "quiet symbolism."²⁶

It is worth posing the question, then, which symbolic order is disrupted by the disturbing phantasms: that of the subject or that of the surrounding world? To put it in other terms, is Cezary's memory, his psyche wounded by the cruelty of the revolution the only source of the disturbing images? Perhaps the newcomer, marked by the traumatic experiences is in fact able to see the deadly danger which really exists in the idyllic world of Nawłóć? The former of these interpretations seems entirely obvious; the latter not so untenable. Two hypotheses may support the latter reading.

If, as Arnold van Gennep argues in *Rites of Passage*, the primary aim of the rituals related to hospitality is to destroy the stranger's "evil eye" (perhaps capable of seeing the undesirable aspects of reality), then one has to admit that this goal was not achieved in Nawłóć.²⁷ In Mickiewicz's epos, "kin or stranger, he that stayed awhile/ Within the Judge's house quickly acquired/ The customs that the very place inspired."²⁸ The situation with Baryka is the exact opposite: when he is leaving, he seems as strange and inscrutable to the inhabitants of the manor house as when he first arrived. The world of the Nawłóć arcadia contains a fundamental lack, it cannot evoke the atmosphere of

²⁶ Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror*.

²⁷ A. van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, University Of Chicago Press; Reprint edition, 1961, 27.

²⁸ A. Mickiewicz, *Pan Tadeusz*, trans. Kenneth R. Mackenzie, Hippocrene Books, New York, 2000, 14.

Soplicowo; in the spring of independence, Nawłóć cannot find space for the strange, half-Russified countryman in the realm of the apparently instinctual Polishness, nor annul his bad premonitions. We cannot claim, then, that those are merely the sign of the protagonist's obsession.

The inhabitants of the manor seem to treat the strangeness of the guest with gentle tolerance. They regard his "bolshevism" – the radical slogans he promotes, the desire to know about the real lives of the working people – as a type of Tolstoyan or communist "blague," which, in the light of social relations of Nawłóć, seems not only exotic but also absurd. As Hipolit says when cautioning his friend about the desire to realize his social ideals among the servants of the "state of Nawłóć": "Here you can do anything you fancy, but only on condition that you don't make yourself look ridiculous" (214). The behavior of the same Hipolit Wielowiejski at the end of the *Odolany* ball, however, is no longer so full of the patronizing arrogance and betrays a deep complex in relation to the guest who is now considered the representative of the new forces born out of the revolution: "He despises us. I know it, and there is nothing more to be said. He refuses to drink with us because we're bourgeois and he's a big Bolshevik" (265).

The phrases "big Bolshevik" and "he despises us" juxtaposed with the negative term borrowed from the Bolshevik propaganda, "we're bourgeois," which implies the detested departing class of land owners, seem to reveal Hipolit's feeling of inferiority in relation to the visitor from revolutionary Russia. It is as if the heir to the Nawłóć fortune felt the pressure of the forces of History, which transform him and the class of people like him (Hipolit's outburst of anger verging on aggression immediately gets transferred onto his brother Anastazy) into a pernicious anachronism. One suspects that the bad premonitions affected not only the stranger who witnessed the revolution but also others in Nawłóć. Yet only Baryka voices them openly.

What is the social order of Nawłóć, then? I believe it is a cultural cliché, which attempts to hide the vehement present of the beginning of the 1920s. The Soplicowo of Nawłóć is an impure myth, or, to use a very contemporary term, a perforated myth. Through the cracks and gaps of this world based on the unstable, moving ground, enters chaos, signifying the element of History, which is also present here. Authors of articles and books on the novel have pointed out the fact that Nawłóć has a second bottom. They have written on the dark feelings which hide under the surface of the apparent idyll, about the summery world and its underlying annihilation and uncertainty.²⁹ A radical change in the context of interpretation of *Przedwiośnie* would allow to develop these suggestions further.

In his book on the British artist, photographer and author of installations, *Helen Chadwick: ikonografia podmiotowości*, drawing inspiration from the work of Julia Kristeva, Paweł Leszkowicz comments on the fragility of the boundary dividing the symbolic order, or the world of human life and action, from the semiotic, or the sphere

²⁹ The first of those terms is used by Z. J. Adamczyk in *Przedwiośnie Stefana Żeromskiego w świetle dyskusji i polemik z 1925 roku*, WSP, Kielce, 1988, 52; the second by D. Gawin, *Polska wieczny romans...*, 124.

of primary, uncontrolled drives. In his suggestive interpretations, among others, of the work "Chocolate," Leszkowicz points to "the dark modality of the subject and reality"; he defines the semiotic with the metaphor of "the sensual lining of the world which constitutes both the ground and the reverse of the symbolic order and the visibility related to it."³⁰ The author is particularly interested in the fluidity or permeability of the boundary between "the amorphous interior" and "the normative exterior," the moments of rupture of the symbolic structure, when it opens to the irrational and the sensual.³¹

We can find such moments also in "Nawłóć." Paradoxically, the more the author emphasizes the symbolic, culturally fixed character of the Nawłóć Soplicowo, the more it undergoes a semiotization. The repressed chaos, the babble of history, rise to the surface of the text and mark it with inscriptions, attacking the icons and signs most powerfully fixed in national mythology. The scene of feeding poultry, famous from Mickiewicz's epos, in "Nawłóć" becomes a mad attack of "the poultry soviet"; the stately polonaise, in *Pan Tadeusz* a symbol of distinction and stability of a cultural form, is replaced at the ball in *Odolany* with the Cossack's wild "Russki dance" (166, 264). The banquets which should unify end in stammering, drunken cacophony.

Little is left also of Mickiewicz's simple "Let us love one other," if we apply this entreaty to the love relationships of the characters. Although the problem of eroticism in *Przedwiośnie* is not the concern of this essay, it is worth pointing out, that, similar to History, eroticism is inseparable from the powers of destruction. The inseparably conjoined instincts of death and desire³² pulsate under the cover of narration stylized to sound antiquated.³³ Their escalation may be found in the scene of Karolina's death, who is poisoned by a rival. Seen and touched by Cezary, the body of the beautiful girl transforms from the erotic to the traumatic. It begins to arouse terror, and, as the narrator's description suggests, disgust.

After Karolina's death, an unsurpassable border of hostile estrangement is created between the "strange visitor" (321) and the manor inhabitants. Baryka has to leave the world of Nawłóć and his stay at the Chłodek farm is but an episode, a stop on his way back.

"Nawłóć" is not anachronistic in relation to the other parts of the novel. Apparently only the context of the beginning of the 1920s can give the story about a visit to a landowners' manor the right, suggestive inflection. "Nawłóć" is a record of the fragility and uncertainty of the world after (the seemingly distant) revolution. The instability and chaos, the author seems to argue, are hidden even in what is most lasting and solid in the archetypal haven of Polishness.

³⁰ Paweł Leszkowicz, *Helen Chadwick*, 188.

³¹ Ibid. 133-8; a paraphrase of a passage from page 137.

³² Henryk Markiewicz wrote about "the tangle of elemental and brutal passions" in the world of Nawłóć (*Przedwiośnie* Stefana Żeromskiego, 14).

³³ It is worth pointing out the footnote to the reader, but also other fragments of the text whose blatant eroticism is barely hidden by the poetic fig leaf, as in the abovementioned memory of Laura's secret tryst with Baryka at the ball in *Odolany*.

Such interpretative thesis provokes several questions. My reading of the two parts of the novel inspired by the anthropology of impurity is intended as an opening of space for reflection on Zeromski's work and, more broadly, on the relation between social life and literature at the beginning of the 1920s.³⁴

The discovery of the strangeness within oneself is connected in Kristeva's theory to the repression of the abject: the dark semiotic sphere of subjectivity is marked by disgust and removed outside the frame of the order of the I or Us which thus constitutes itself.³⁵ Here I can only remark that in the third part of the novel the revolution is represented by a legible figure, that of Lulek, the communist. The narrator does everything in his power to make this sympathizer of world revolt as hideous as possible to the reader, to place him outside the border or to move him beyond the boundary of social acceptance.

If the ordering and purifying of the symbolic space of the new state was related to repressing the revolutionary abject, it is worth asking about the consequences of this mechanism for the shaping of the vision of the social world in newly independent Poland. How does establishing bolshevism as the outer border of the (un)acceptable and (im)permissible in the "welcoming discourse" of the new state translate into the character of the inner social norms and prohibitions?³⁶ What gets removed together with the revolutionary abject from the new interpretation of reality? What is considered

³⁴ Apart from the canonical novels of 1918-1925—*Przedwojnie*, *Pokolenie Marka Świdry*, *Generał Barcz* by Juliusz Kaden-Bandrowski and *Romans Teresy Hennert* by Zofia Nalkowska, the less well-known prose is interesting in this context. The novel by Piotr Choynowski, *Dom w śródmieściu* (Gebethner and Wolf, Warsaw, 1923) and Zbigniew Bartkiewicz's collection of short stories and fictionalized sketches about the everyday lives in the first years of new Poland (*Wyzwolenie*, Księgarnia Św. Wojciecha, Poznań, 1925). The influence of the political differences of the time on the ways of perceiving reality is well defined in the novels by Józef Weyssenhoff (*Cudno i ziemia cudeńska*, "Biblioteka Polska," Warsaw, 1921; *Noc i świt*, "Biblioteka Polska," Warsaw, 1925) who represents the position of the national democrats and, on the other hand, in the novel by Stefania Tatarówna, a socialist from the Polish Socialist Party (*Przeciw losowi*, Księgarnia J. Czarneckiego, Cracow, 1930; the novel was written in mid-1920s, but was only published in 1930). It would be also interesting to look at the beginning of new Poland from a perspective other than the anti-Bolshevik one; this is offered by the communist Lucjan Rudnicki in his short story collection *Republika demokratyczna* (Książka, Warsaw, 1921). These titles are obviously merely selected examples from a much broader literary legacy from that period.

³⁵ J. Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror*, especially the chapters "Approaching Abjection" and "...Qui Tollis Peccata Mundi." One of the literary-historical uses of the theory is Małgorzata Sugiera's work devoted to the play *Wijuny* by Teresa Lubkiewicz-Urbanowicz, which focuses on "the gesture of removing outside the stranger who in fact is inside the subject" ("Leworęczna i wilkołak...", esp. 151-5).

³⁶ Małgorzata Jacyno introduces the idea of "the welcoming discourse" which "establishes the borders of the new order and rules of participation in that order" in her book *Iluzje codzienności. O teorii socjologicznej Pierra Bourdieau*, Wydawnictwo IFiS PAN, Warsaw, 1997, 63.

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the idiom of Bolshevik discourse? One could also reflect on whether the literature of the time does or does not recognize the dangerous, socially underprivileged section of the society as capable of starting a revolution; and whether its representation of reality involves the dynamic of social change or the lack of such dynamic. I believe the problems signaled above carry interesting interpretive potential.

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