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The Unwritten Epic. Remarks on a Forgotten Liberation

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This enormous labor undertaken in the shadows comes to light in dreams, thoughts, decisions, and above all at moments of crisis or of social upheaval; it forms the great common ground, the reserve of peoples and individuals. Revolution and war, like a fever, are best suited to get it moving.

Dr Pierre Mabilie

1.

It is sometimes argued that the most popular genre of German nineteenth century novel was *Bildungsroman*, which depicts the protagonist's journey through time and space, from immaturity to self-determination. However, it seems that Polish cultural history lacks narratives of this type: cycles or collections of stories, films or images that would present emancipation, comprising its signs, or more specifically – *signifiers*.

When it comes to indicators or *signifiers* of emancipation, the few Polish novels, studies or television productions addressing this topic are rather insufficient and usually attract only academics. No such texts of culture circulate widely enough in Polish discourse to become narratives that organize the collective imagination. Indeed, they are not *signifiers* in the sense of being able

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to organize subjective self-representation and regulate how Poles perceive themselves.

For a text of culture to become a *signifier* in the Lacanian sense, it needs to establish a self-representation of the collective subject, allowing it to wander through a vision of its own history. On this journey, *signifiers* function as road signs that help to stay the course. Such fantasy routes constitute the backbone of imaginary identity. Determined by family life and education, they are also evoked during countless state holidays, celebrations and commemorations, as well as reiterated on these occasions by millions of voices and discussed in feature or popularizing programs. Finally, they are depicted on posters and graffiti that adorn cities, or elaborated in myriads of memes that circulate in social media.

Since images are inevitably replacing text today, these *signifiers* have to be pictorial, for example cinematic, in order to imbue themselves in the visual domain. Further, they need to be reflected in street names and holidays, or anchored to sites of commemoration such as monuments or museums established around crucial nodes in the space of collective memory.

Obviously, in Poland there does exist a narrative that organizes the self-representation of the collective subject: the epic of the gentry, which tells the story of this particular social group. Thematically, it encompasses control over the vast Intermarium during the First Republic, loss of this position during the Partitions, subsequent struggle with Russia, failed uprisings unsupported by peasants, recovery during the Second Republic – in the form of a hegemonic caste comprised by the intelligentsia, the military and the administration – Nazi and Soviet occupation that culminated in the heroic bloodshed of the Warsaw Rising, and finally – the ambiguous era of the Polish People's Republic. However, this epic is martyrological in character and not emancipatory at all.

At the same time, the last hundred and fifty years was a time marked by large-scale migration and social mobility, leading to the empowerment of the subjugated, the humiliation of the high and mighty, and the emergence of the middle class. Nevertheless, this epic story remains unrecognized and few traces of it can be found in Polish collective consciousness.

One additional difficulty is posed in this respect by the necessity to present social movement. The point is not to depict forms of peasant life, as preserved to this day in pockets of authentic folk culture or recorded in former days by ethnologists in accounts of peasant habits and dialects. Nor is it crucial to develop sociological analyses of *Pamiętniki młodych chłopów* [Memoirs of peasant youth], although unlike other texts they certainly document the evident cracks in Polish class society during the interwar period. Finally, the goal would not be to reconstruct the genesis of the working class, along with its

rise and fall. Instead, the representational challenge concerns depicting the mighty stream of emancipation and personifying the slow yet unstoppable liberation from social, material, political and mental enslavement. The purpose is thus to demonstrate the ambivalence of loftiness and pettiness, cruelty and vigor that have accompanied this epic, as well as to lift its protagonists from anonymity.

Is such a representation even possible? Can a historical process be rendered as a protagonist of an epic poem?

In the essay "The Legend of the Monster City," Czesław Miłosz describes in this way Balzac's *La Comédie humaine*, where the rise of capitalist society in nineteenth century Paris is captured in the metaphor of city as a monstrous organism. Importantly, Miłosz does not attempt to naturalize social reality but to grasp the process of ceaseless transformation and dissolution of all identity – both individual and collective – in the melting pot of modern society. "Where the layers intermingle," he writes, "where new forces are forever swimming up from the depths, and where, in turn, former oligarchs sink to the ranks of the proletariat; where one must constantly become accustomed to seeing new faces and their images obscure the faces of friends, separating the friends seen today from those seen the day before yesterday – there the rush to transformation and the interest in transformism are understandable."¹

Unfortunately, Polish culture cannot boast any such "human comedy" or even works comparable to films by Woody Allen, which describe the condition of globalized bourgeoisie in the second half of the twentieth century, regardless of whether set in New York, London or Barcelona. All we have is *Lalka* [*The Doll*] by Bolesław Prus and *Ziemia obiecana* [*The Promised Land*] by Władysław Reymont. Notwithstanding the acuity of these works, they are simply too far removed in time and too static.

Contemporary literature, which indulges in self-referential play with subjectivity, narration and form is not really interested in the epic. The 2013 novel *Ości* [*Fish bones*] by Ignacy Karłowicz, one example of such writing, confirms the thesis formulated by Marcel Reich-Ranicki, namely that Polish literature after 1989 has been incapable of telling the story of how the new society was formed, although it certainly could satirize it.

Perhaps before literature presents the history of emancipation as a relentless stream flowing along (and often against) historical circumstances, historiography could approach this subject. Certainly, however, it cannot be properly addressed by scholars preoccupied with the political history of the

¹ Czesław Miłosz, "The Legend of the Monster City," in *Legends of Modernity. Essays and Letters from Occupied Poland, 1942–1943*, trans. Madeline G. Levine (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2006), 21.

“gentry-nation” with its parliaments, uprisings and underground state. Instead, the angle of social history could help to demonstrate how the hegemonic culture of Catholic nobility, landowners and large parts of the intelligentsia deeply opposed the powerful current of social emancipation. This task could also benefit from engagement of historians who document transformations of mentality and culture – researchers sensitive to the above conflict and eager to pursue its traces in material culture. It would require writing history with awareness of the famous thesis formulated by Walter Benjamin: “There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is never free of barbarism, so barbarism taints the manner in which it was transmitted from one hand to another. The historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from this process of transmission as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain.”²

How many historians of this kind are there in Poland today? It comes as little surprise that important research in this area was done by a Frenchman, Daniel Beauvois.³

2.

Let us begin with the granting of freehold in the Kingdom of Poland. This event is notable since Tsar Alexander II issued his edict on March 2, 1864, shortly after a similar decision was made on the other side of the Atlantic by Abraham Lincoln, who signed the Final Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. This concurrence facilitates tracing intriguing parallels. For example, both acts were passed in the context of conflict with the local gentry – Polish nobility and Southern plantation-owners in America, respectively. Moreover, these steps concerned areas where rebellion was fomenting. Finally, both met with virulent yet reticent opposition from former “slave-owners” – a fact that continues to shape the imaginary of affected communities in both places.

This raises the question whether the liberation of peasants could become the subject of a new historical epic, similarly to the remembrance of the January Uprising of gentry. Although granting freehold was a blow to insurrectionary nobility, Polish historians must face the fact that achieving freedom

2 Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” trans. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings. Volume 4: 1938–1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 392.

3 Daniel Beauvois, *Trójkąt Ukraiński. Szlachta, carat i lud na Wołyniu, Podolu i Kijowszczyźnie 1793–1914* [Ukrainian Triangle. The nobility, the tsar and the people in Volhynia, Podolia and Kiev region 1793–1914], trans. from French Krzysztof Rutkowski (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2011).

is always laudable, even when enabled by the Emperor of Russia. The Edict of Emancipation issued by Alexander II decreed that landowners could no longer make decisions for peasants as well as punish or relocate them. Moreover, the latter received the right to buy property from landlords and were to additionally obtain portions of land for a part of their nominal value, scheduled in long-term redemption payments.

Does anyone reflect in Poland today on the actual meaning of the fact that landowners were formerly legally enabled to “manage peasants,” for example punish or resettle them? That not so long ago one person could brutalize another by the power of the state in order to “discipline” them? Or that people could lose their homestead and property due to resettlement, which could even involve separating them from their families? Will there be a Polish Quentin Tarantino, who could tell a modern story of the cruelty, expulsion and hunger entailed by serfdom? Back then, one could of course appeal to the local panel of judges, but it was presided over by the same person who was responsible for violence, exploitation and relocation, or their plenipotentiary. Few would empathize with the plight and humiliation of serfs, except for the likes of Leon Kruczkowski. Ultimately, the fierce rage invoked by all of the above accumulated over the years and still haunts Polish minds.

The moment when fetters dropped must have marked a profound change in mentality, sensibility and social relations. However, we lack the image of the first emancipated generation – the people who still knew well what the pillory was but could now decide about their fate. I wonder whether their mindset has not been expressed in words cited by Józef Chałasiński: “There must be a lord and you shall obey him, earning your living by winning his grace. It’s just like in the army. What would happen without a general? An ignoramus like you would issue orders and nothing wise would arise from this. God created the world in this way and so shall it be. This is the eternal and pre-established order of things. It should not be broken. When we had serfdom, the nation was more obedient and better.”⁴ Is it the case that the internalized serfdom, or the vision of lordly grandeur brightening up the misery of peasant life, explains the lack of peasant rebellions in those parts of the Republic where Catholicism dominated? After all, the Galician Peasant Uprising (also known as the Galician *Rabacja*, or Slaughter) was an exception rather than rule. Defenders of the nobility’s Sarmatian culture would explain this phenomenon by referring to an idyllic vision of social relations at the manor. It is striking, however, that no such rebellions occurred in slavery-driven southern

4 Quoted after Marcin Zaremba, *Wielka trwoga. Polska 1944–1947. Ludowa reakcja na kryzys* [Great fear. Poland 1944–1947. The popular reaction to the crisis] (Kraków–Warszawa: Znak, Wydawnictwo ISP PAN, 2012), 103.

states in North America. Perhaps this was due to the scale of enslavement, which would corrupt even mental resources. Indeed, Ruthenian peasants living in eastern parts of the Polish Republic would regularly rise against their lords, finding inspiration in Orthodox Christianity and the Cossack tradition. The scale of these rebellions and the dead silence in ethnically Polish territories suggest the need for a closer examination of the role played by Counter-Reformation in the Polish Church.

When and how has peasant mentality changed? How have the first emancipated generations embraced their newly-found individual subjectivity, which was necessary to manage farms on their own? How have the social relations described by Reymont in *Chłopi* [*The Peasants*] developed during the thirty-five years separating the tsar's edict and the writer's account?

The key element here is the right to purchase land. The tsar never delivered on the promise to sell the nobility's lands for a fraction of their cost. This raises the obvious question about the specific history of the landowners' resistance to parcellation. Do we know the names of those who were able to weasel out of these changes by hindering or evading them? We know the names of heroes who fell during numerous risings because they could not have been forgiven by Russian authorities. Still, who (and how) has been able to ensure that as little as 8% of the gentry's land was actually parceled? Polish historical sources, which offer highly restrained accounts of agrarian reforms, usually emphasize the good intentions of subsequent Polish progressives. Tadeusz Kościuszko and Uniwersał Połaniecki, the "red" wing of the January Uprising; but their well-meaning (and that of others) typically had little overall impact. Sources remain tongue-tied about the fierce opposition among most landowners, or the bribes, the balls for tsarist officials, and the practice of marrying off daughters to "influential figures" – in short, all the efforts made to weasel out of dividing the land.

How do we know then that this was the case? It would be better to ask: could it really be any different? It is a matter of logic, not history. The latter is silent in this respect.

More sources are available on questions of the misery caused by the resistance of landowners, and by the emergence of countryside social relations portrayed later by Reymont. It is thanks to his novel that we can begin to imagine the ruthlessness of life conditioned by hunger for land. At the same time, this work of literature seems almost ahistorical, as if the discussed deep transformations were meticulously purified from it. Like an old photograph where smiling or despairing faces reveal nothing about the actual relations among the portrayed, Reymont's saga-like novel constitutes a section through time, disclosing a certain structure but ignoring its genealogy. In fact, this may actually be the reason why it won the Nobel Prize: the Norwegian committee

could identify in it truly universal features of raw peasant existence. At the same time, however, the oppressive genesis of relations described by Reymont – entirely dissimilar from the situation in Scandinavia, where peasants enjoyed freedom for centuries – is almost entirely suppressed in *Chłopi*.

Has anyone in Poland commemorated the first moments of freedom? Tsarist authorities understood the necessity to do so, and received support from vast numbers of peasant benefactors who sponsored the monument of Alexander II in Częstochowa. Why has this story fallen into oblivion? Perhaps in order to avoid reflection about the inscription on this memorial: “Erected in 1889 by peasants in the Kingdom of Poland. Let the Edict of February 19, 1864 remain forever enshrined in the memory of Polish peasants as the day when their prosperity was restituted.” This initiative of Russian authorities received mass support from peasants. Thus, perhaps the “active forgetting” of their gratitude to tsar – the vanquisher of patriots – on the part of hegemonic Polish culture is symptomatic of the reluctance to consider who was supposed to benefit from the struggle for independence in the nineteenth century, and who feared it.

The history of the monument to tsar is both dramatic and telling. It suffices to say that there was a botched attempt to blow it up in 1904 before it was finally demolished by the ever-efficient Germans in 1917.

It is equally fascinating to recount the history of granting property rights to peasants in Galicia. All it takes is to “picture” the collection of documents published by Professor Kieniewicz as *Rewolucja polska 1846* [Polish revolution 1846].⁵ This history includes the Kraków Rising and the 1846 Slaughter, the suppression of peasant movements by Austria, the Spring of Nations, and the decree issued by Governor Franz von Stadion on April 22, regarding emancipation “in the name of the Emperor.”

Some villages welcomed the decree with appreciation. In eastern Roztocze, which was then part of Galicia, people would erect “freedom crosses” made of stone from Brusno.⁶ They could constitute a place of commemoration, but in fact became forgotten fossils. Blocks or crosses standing in important parts of villages have overgrown with moss and the inscriptions made after emancipation are now mostly illegible. One that is still readable can be found in Huta Różaniecka and commemorates “liberation from serfdom by His Highness

5 *Rewolucja polska 1846 roku* [Polish revolution 1846], ed. Stefan Kieniewicz (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1950).

6 Maciej Piotrowski, “Zapomniane pomniki wolności. O pamiątkach zniesienia pańszczyzny z bruśnieńskiego ośrodka kamieniarskiego” [Forgotten monuments of freedom. About the memorabilia of the abolition of serfdom from the stonemasonry center in Brusno] (unpublished article).

Ferdinand.”⁷ Some, however, have been covered with lime. What do we know about the stories behind these stones, their placement and the experiences connected with it? What is left of the pride that filled the first generation of the liberated, and of the shame felt by those unwilling to cultivate the memory of the humiliation experienced by their forebears? What remains known of the social genesis of Galician poverty and the Straw Man’s dance in *Wesele* [*The Wedding*] by Stanisław Wyspiański?

3.

Częstochowa, Sosnowiec, Łódź. After slavery formally ended in USA, black citizens migrated to northern cities like Chicago or Detroit. Where have Polish peasants gone? Industry was booming in several urban centers in Congress Poland. Luckily, thanks to Reymont’s *Ziemia obiecana* – and especially its film adaptation by Andrzej Wajda – we can sense the throbbing beast of rising capitalism, which swallowed up legions of people, transporting them into a new era and turning them into proletariat, even though moments ago they were migrants from hungry peasant villages or small Jewish towns. Possibly most of them really had nowhere to go, despite the existence of several industrial cities, and were caught in the vicious circle of mutual hate that led to pogroms.

Ziemia obiecana is perhaps the only work in Polish culture, which accurately pictures the above-mentioned throbbing beast, or what Marx and Engels famously described as the “constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation [that – author’s note] distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones.”⁸ After all, this beast does not emerge in *Lalka* – an ostensible apologia for the rising bourgeoisie. Widely accepted as the emancipation story of the Polish middle class, the novel indeed records the arrival of capitalism, but it lacks something crucial: an account of how Wokulski, a tough merchant, really amassed his fortune. Why would Prus consider his business adventures in Russia to be unworthy of presentation? The vast open spaces he must have traversed, the negotiations with Russian wealthy men, and the scale of transactions he made must have been unimaginable for Poles. This story surely featured vodka, champagne and caviar, as well as glimpses of non-Slavic peoples living alongside Russians: Mordovians, Tatars, Tajiks and Kazakhs. Naturally,

7 Piotrowski, *Zapomniane pomniki wolności*.

8 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, trans. William Reeves (Utrecht: Open Source Socialist Publishing, 2008), 10.

Henryk Sienkiewicz could not describe Andrzej Kmicic tricking Muscovites due to Russian censorship, but the story of a Pole enriching himself in the Empire could have been regarded differently.

James Clavell used the fate of an English merchant known in Chinese as Tai-Pan to tell the story of establishing the British colony in Hong Kong. This narrative continues to shape the Anglo-Saxon imagination by evoking vast oceans, deals with Chinese mandarins, and large sums handled by monopoly-owners who controlled almost the entirety of tea trade in the mid-nineteenth century. Clavell's novel features Chinese feasts, pirates and courtesans, but all the while the monster of capitalism is lurking in the background, breathing down the necks of all protagonists. In contrast, the story of Wokulski does not feature this beast, which is slayed in the Polish novel by the monster of lordly arrogance.

Balzac also elaborated on the unhappy love life of his protagonists, but was well aware that their feelings are subject to the frenetic logic of capitalism, or the city-Moloch. Emotions experienced by Wokulski, however, pay homage to the imaginary of the Polish hegemonic class – the gentry. Desperately craving recognition, he tries to find a place for himself in this narrow-minded and vain social stratum, consequently forgetting about his own calling and truth, namely that he “personifies the capital” and should love in line with its principles. This is indeed the reason why he perishes, and his main weakness, that is lack of faith in himself, remains the heritage of the Polish middle class.

One could also ask about the memory of probably the strongest expression of capitalism in Poland – Jewish entrepreneurship. Large trading companies ran by Jews operated throughout the tsarist world. From Białystok to Vladivostok, these business ventures contributed to the Empire's financial bloodstream. However, Jewish history only partly overlaps with the Polish epic of emancipation because the Shoah violently separated these peoples' shared fate.

In fact, it was the consequence of a specific “education to Polishness.” Out of understandable reasons, Poland had no republican education of the kind found in the French Third Republic and contributing to the development of civic identity. Stripped of independence, the gentry-nation and its ally the Church strove to incorporate liberated peasants into its project of nostalgic identity, never really bothering about civic formation. This is aptly described in the well-known book *Polak i katolik* [Pole and Catholic] by Michał Łuczewski. The simplest way to rekindle Polishness among the peasants was to draw on their everyday experiences: life led in the configuration of dependence comprised by peasant cottage, lordly mansion, priestly church and Jewish inn. Against this background of relations it was easy to point to the Jew as the alien element without which everything would be so much different.

This reveals the logic that one is a Pole insofar as one is not a Jew. American historian Robert Blobaum confirms this, arguing that “even though not every national identity bases on anti-Semitism, each and every one is to a degree founded on excluding Otherness. National identity is not based on who one is, but who one is (or is not) in relation to the Other. For Czechs these can be Germans or Jews, while for Croats – Hungarians. For Poles these were not so much Germans or Russians as Jews.”⁹ Interestingly, this is yet another vital point elucidated by a historian “from outside.”

Few contemporary intellectuals explore the area of national education, which may partly explain the success of the book by Łuczewski. Obviously, the novel *Szybyłowe prace* [Sisyphus's works] by Stefan Żeromski (1897) may seem historically distant but it aptly describes education in the second half of the nineteenth century, when the school was the crux of nationalism and politics. However, it is a story of educating the nobility. Even the more contemporary novel *Zmory* [Nightmares] by Emil Zegadłowicz (1935) is limited in scope to this class. What should we know about the vagaries of educational institutions in the autonomous Galicia, in the Russified “country at the River Vistula,” or in Greater Poland, under Prussia?

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, mass society emerged in Poland but it had a different face in each part of the country's annexed territory. In Congress Poland under Russian rule the most interesting aspect is industrialization. The situation was completely different under Prussian rule, primarily owing to the fact that Bismarck's policy aimed to politically activate the masses, including Poles. Finally, in Galicia it primarily had the character of a peasant movement because all industry in the Habsburg Empire was located on Czech lands. At the same time, the modern Jewish society was forming in large Polish cities.

Importantly, the emergence of mass society entailed the rise of politics, which was the condition of revealing the subjectivity of the masses. This process began with the formation of modern political parties which strove to achieve mass participation in political life. In 1892, the Polish Socialist Party (PPS) held a convention in Paris; in 1893, the Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania (SDKPiL) was founded, and the National League (Liga Narodowa) was established in all partitions, while in 1895 the People's Party (SL) was created in Galicia. Once again, these pivotal events are entirely missing from Polish collective memory.

9 Robert Blobaum, *Rok 1905 to początek nowoczesnej polityki* [The year 1905 marks the beginning of modern politics], interview by Wiktor Marzec and Kamil Piskała, in *Rewolucja 1905. Przewodnik Krytyki Politycznej*, ed. Kamil Piskała and Wiktor Marzec (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2013), 77.

And then, suddenly, the explosion of the 1905 Revolution invited the people to the political stage, putting socialists in the limelight of public eye. Is there any cinematographic trace of this apart from *Gorączka* [Fever] by Agnieszka Holland? Despite weak industrialization limiting its base, the socialist party played a huge political role, but is it commemorated today in any form?

Prior to this period, the Church appeared to oppose the political emancipation of the people, siding with the paternalistic culture of the gentry, which embraced Counter-Reformation and thus opposed broader liberation tendencies. However, the revolution caused the episcopate to change its position on mass politics. In the countryside, the National Democracy rallied around the Church in the effort to foster national identity in opposition to Jews and the peasant parties that strove to forge class consciousness against “masters.”

These processes appear to have fallen into oblivion. However, just like today, no political party, sovereign power or traditional culture was able to deal with these forces. To this day, Poles seem incapable of coping with the awakening of the people. In the Second Republic, authorities ordered to shoot at striking peasants, while the Polish People’s Republic tried to plough through Solidarity with armored vehicles. Today, the stirring of the people is associated with the glow of pogrom fires.

4.

The First World War is virtually nonexistent in Polish imagination. Two million citizens serving in the partitioners’ armies have no legend of their own – only around sixteen thousand serving in the legions are enshrined in collective memory. However, the Great War brought intense drama and fundamental change. From the Polish perspective, the year 1918 meant primarily the collapse of empires that annexed Poland, making it possible for the century-old dream of regaining sovereignty to finally come true. It needs to be borne in mind, however, that this hope was largely formulated in nostalgic terms and filtered through a Romantic vision of history, which idealized the First Republic and its pre-modern character. Aside from several exceptions such as the destruction of Kalisz, Poland was left largely untouched by the global conflict, which in turn shaped the character of the Second Republic.

In Western Europe the situation was entirely different; before these societies the Great War revealed its hypermodern face: mass industrialized killing and meaningless instrumental action. Indeed, Verdun prefigured later death factories. In response, a large-scale rebellion swept through armies and societies in Germany, France and Russia. Revolutionary dissent against the order that paved the way for WWI, and then the reaction to the revolution, shaped the cultural and political trajectory of Western countries, which kept “escaping

forward” throughout the twentieth century – a strategy that appears entirely incomprehensible from the Polish perspective.

Only the aforementioned destruction of Kalisz by the German army in August 1914 evokes experiences similar to those of Western Europeans: out of 70,000 citizens only 5,000 survived. This event is depicted in the novel *Noce i Dnie* [*Nights and Days*] by Maria Dąbrowska but never made it into the canon of Polish imagination, just like most things originating in Western Poland. Dramatic changes in peasant life during the war include Bieżeństwo – the evacuation of two million people, primarily Orthodox Christians, expelled from Eastern Poland deep into the Empire by retreating Russian forces.¹⁰ Most of them never returned. How has this affected ethnic and religious proportions in these regions? Finally, as is typically the case during war, there were rebellions, attacks on manors, and instances of seizing land from the gentry. Was this an echo of the Galician Slaughter?

When the socialist government formed on November 7, 1918 in Lublin Ignacy Daszyński promised parcellation but then went back on it, causing great disappointment. Then the year 1920 brought the Polish-Soviet War and turned focus on peasant reaction to it. The Land Reform Implementation Act of July 15, 1920 was passed just as the frontline was breaking. Do texts of culture that recount these events even acknowledge these circumstances? Russians and Ukrainians have Mikhail Sholokhov’s *And Quiet Flows the Don* – the story of politicizing the Cossacks during the revolution. Does the Polish collective imagination have any narrative about peasant engagement in 1920, which some argue to be the first moment when they identified with the Polish state? The only account of these developments is limited to the perspective of military and intellectual elites, with gentry looming in the background.

The March Constitution of 1921 was middle-class in character as it guaranteed the inviolability of property rights. The film *Śmierć prezydenta* [*Death of a president*] by Jerzy Kawalerowicz perfectly captures the era’s political conflict at the parliamentary level. But what about the failed promises of the Second Republic – primarily the halting of agrarian reform – and the political class emancipation of peasants in the 1920s? What about the split of subjectivity into national and revolutionary in the 1930s? Events like the pogrom in Przytyk or the peasant strikes of 1937 certainly demonstrate some kind of turbulence in this swelling wave. Do they not have enough dramatic potential to become the basis for a novel or narrative in some other medium?

The period 1939–1956 as well as later years are discussed from the perspective of the emancipation process in my book *Prześniona rewolucja* [*Sleepwalking the revolution*]. The crucial event in this time frame – the Shoah

¹⁰ Aneta Prymaka-Oniszk, *Bieżeństwo 1915* [*Escape 1915*] (Wołowiec: Czarne, 2016).

– entered the collective imagination primarily thanks to films such as *Ida*, *Pokłosie* [Aftermath] and *W ciemności* [In darkness]. However, the experience of peasant entrepreneurship or “business” of hiding Jews, trading food, and occupying abandoned places in the broken social tissue has never been visualized, just like the civil war after 1945 and the land reform implemented under the gun barrels of the NKVD. It is characteristic that these agrarian policies are not discussed by contemporary historians. The craving for vengeance and the sense of injustice – which accumulated over the centuries and revealed themselves in this period – are also glossed over today, perhaps except for the film *Wołny* [Volhynia] about the massacres of Poles, which is nevertheless stripped of larger historical context.

5.

Collective identity is a bundle of fantasies or stories that subjects are telling about themselves as well repeating, enacting and using as a mirror for self-examination. All of these stories need to be ripe in dramatic tension and full of ups and downs in order to reflect the subject’s inner dynamic. At the same time, they must be morally coherent, or capable of being inscribed within some ethical framework. For this reason, in every identity-bundle individual narratives create tensions that offer valuable “lessons.” Among these fantasy stories there is always one that becomes hegemonic. It dominates the imagination, pushing all others into the shadows by hindering the development and meaningful unification of various elements, perspectives and images stored in the unconscious.

In the social imaginary the unwritten epic, which I demand here, exists precisely in the unconscious mode. All episodes recounted above have many representations and forms of documentation dispersed in archives, book and film libraries as well as university offices occupied by “specialists in a given area.” As such, they remain in the dark, unable to return the gaze of the Polish collective subject and thus failing to provide it with a future-oriented trajectory or scenario. Crushed under the weight of the phantasmal lost Republic and “victory through failure,” these histories live on as scraps, shreds and pieces – the material for future historiography according to Walter Benjamin. Perhaps even their sheer number creates a situation that can be likened to supersaturated solution. It would take some kind of a crystal nucleus to furnish collective memory with a new structure and give all elements their place for expression within a meaningful whole. However, none of this can happen as long as the dominant fantasy remains martyrological in character, or as long as the meticulous work of deconstructing the hegemonic position remains unfinished.

At the same time, however, effort needs to be repeatedly made to reconstruct this “unwritten epic.” It is not the point to explicate in minute detail all stages of the emancipation process, nor even to show their dramatic tension or individual gravity. The goal would rather be to display the great stream of history that transformed Poland during the last one and a half century by advancing emancipation and leading Poles to the maturity requisite for freedom, despite the fact that the memory of this has been entirely repressed.

Translated by Grzegorz Czemieli

Abstract

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The Unwritten Epic. Remarks on a Forgotten Liberation

The author addresses the issue of the history of Polish emancipatory movement and its lacking epic. When it comes to indicators or *signifiers* of emancipation, the few Polish novels, studies or television productions addressing this topic are rather insufficient and usually attract only academics. No such texts of culture circulate widely enough in Polish discourse to become narratives that organize the collective imagination. Indeed, they are not *signifiers* in the sense of being able to organize subjective self-representation and regulate how Poles perceive themselves. For a text of culture to become a *signifier*, it needs to establish a self-representation of the collective subject, allowing it to wander through a vision of its own history. On this journey, *signifiers* function as road signs that help to stay the course. Such fantasy routes constitute the backbone of national identity. Determined by family life and education, they are also evoked during countless state holidays, celebrations and commemorations, as well as reiterated on these occasions by millions of voices and discussed in feature or popularizing programs. The author shows, what could be the backbone of such a narrative of liberation in Poland.

Keywords

Polish history, emancipation, liberation, untold narrative, serfdom, slavery, postcolonialism, signifier