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# **A Post-Colonial Perspective on Polish Soil: Some Questions of a Skeptic.**

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## A Post-Colonial Perspective on Polish Soil: Some Questions of a Skeptic

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**H**aving established my attitude toward post-colonial studies conducted in Poland or pertaining to Polish reality already in the title,<sup>1</sup> I will remain faithful to my assumed role: I will ask questions and express surprise.<sup>2</sup> I admit that I have a problem with understanding how we might expand the definition of post-colonialism to our home, to Polish<sup>3</sup> and inter-European

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- 1 An extensive bibliography can be found in Ewa Domańska's afterword to L. Gandhi's book *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* trans. by J. Serwański, Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2008, 157-165.
  - 2 Such a perspective is allowed in the Polish context without any objections. The article by M. Golinczak entitled "Postkolonializm. Przed użyciem wstrząsnąć" from the magazine *Recykling Idei*, vol.10, 2008 would be an exception. A thesis about the paradoxical character of Polish post-colonial discourse is also presented by M. Klimowicz in the article "Retoryczność polskiego dyskursu postkolonialnego" (*Studia postkolonialne nad kulturą i cywilizacją polską*, edited by Stępniaik, K., D. Trześniowski, Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2010), 63-70.
  - 3 Even the latest book on the subject does not remove doubts. It is a collective volume, *Studia postkolonialne nad kulturą i cywilizacją polską*, where the least convincing, or rather evasive articles, are those articles that are written precisely to show the perspectives of examining Polish culture according to a post-colonial method. See

turf.<sup>4</sup> To explain the nature of those doubts, I return to *Orientalism* by Edward Said, a seminal book, which clearly specifies the requisite research assumptions for the field; a book which is transparent, passionately written, and combines knowledge with the ethical sensitivity of its author. In the "Introduction," Said writes the following:

Orientalism is premised upon exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West. He is never concerned with the Orient except as the first cause of what he says. What he says and writes, by virtue of the fact that it is said or written, is meant to indicate that the Orientalist is outside the Orient, both as an existential and as a moral fact. The principal product of this exteriority is of course representation: as early as Aeschylus's play *The Persians* the Orient is transformed from a very far distant and often threatening Otherness into figures that are relatively familiar (in Aeschylus's case, grieving Asiatic women). The dramatic immediacy of representation in *The Persians* obscures the fact that the audience is watching a highly artificial enactment of what a non-Oriental has made into a symbol for the whole Orient. My analysis of the Orientalist text therefore places emphasis on the evidence, which is by no means invisible, for such representations as representations, not as "natural" depictions of the Orient.... The exteriority of the representation is always governed by some version of the truism that if the Orient could represent itself, it would; since it cannot, the representation does the job, for the West, and *faute de mieux*, for the poor Orient. "Sie können sich nicht vertreten, sie müssen vertreten werden," as Marx wrote in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.<sup>5</sup>

It seems that the act of representation, replacing an "original" voice with an exterior discourse is a key element of Said's concept of "orientalism" and "post-colonialism." The post-colonial relation establishes structures of power, but is not entirely included within those very same structures. It is not enough to dominate militarily, politically, or economically. One must likewise assume a position of domination from within the world of discourse, in the world of culture. From the other side, one has to remain in a submissive position,

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Wawrzyszek, I. "Badanie kultury polskiej w perspektywie światowych studiów postkolonialnych," 11-19.

4 An example of such extension to, among others, the Baltic states is provided by D. Ch. Moore. See Moore, D. Ch. "Is the Post – in the Postcolonial the Post – in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique" in *PMLA*, vol. 116, no.1, January 2001.

5 Said, E.W. *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon, 1978.

a position of the “poor relative,” who can exist in the world of culture only due to the mediation of the wealthy patron with access to the languages of the “world,” knowing how to reach an audience. In my understanding, the imbalance described by Said refers specifically to situations in which an exotic culture, barely known or unknown to the Western recipient (the dominant figure) functions in a form derived from his – the man of the West’s – imaginary figurations of the subject in question. The exotic character of objects constituting the subject of research and their distance from the position occupied by the researcher and his readers is not an addition to the theory, but the very condition, *sine qua non*, of its strength. Proof of the importance of exoticism as the foundation of Said’s theory can be found in his explanation of omitting Russia in the perspective of his post-colonial research: “Russia, however, conquered mostly through adjacency. Other than Great Britain or France, which kept reaching out across thousands of miles beyond their borders, to distant continents, Russia kept moving further and further East and South, swallowing countries and nations that existed next to it.”<sup>6</sup> These remarks appeared in *Culture and Imperialism* in 1993, having in mind Russia’s expansion in Central Asia. It is an important remark (although one should add that the Russian annexations also took place in the North and West). Russia developed its empire at the cost of its neighbors, conquering new territories, but can we simultaneously say that it colonized them according to Said’s definition, meaning that it imposed its own view of the conquered cultures and nations on the rest of the world? It might have done so with respect to the nations of the Central Asia, but it had little chance of achieving such ends in relation to European countries, thinking of Poland and the Baltic states. Hence, one should not confuse political expansion and its effects on conquered nations with cultural or mental colonization.<sup>7</sup> If we do, literary studies turns into political studies and an unwillingness to look into nuances concerning states dependent on Russia within the West, or even the inability to pass judgments about them from afar, will become a measure of knowledge about our part of the world and experience.

For this reason, the definition of post-colonialism should not be stretched over every historical instance of imperial violence through which the opposition of dominant and dominated emerges. Clare Cavanagh seems to think that

6 Said, E.W. *Culture and Imperialism*...

7 It seems that concepts by E.M. Thompson in her *Imperial Knowledge: Russian Literature and Colonialism* are based precisely on such radical simplifications, and in particular her articles dealing directly with the situation of modern day Poland. See “Said a sprawa polska. Przeciwno kulturowej bezsilności peryferii,” *Europa – Tygodnik Idei*, issue 26 (65), 2005, 11; and “W kolejce po aprobatę. Kolonialna mentalność polskich elit,” *Europa – Tygodnik Idei*, issue 38 (180), 2007.

such an approach is acceptable. When writing about the partitions of Poland and the country's position after being erased from the map of Europe for over a hundred years, she concludes the following: "It is hard to find more impressive post-colonial references. It would be difficult to find in the First or Third World a more wholesale indictment of the hypocrisies and human costs that have underwritten the achievements of Western civilization."<sup>8</sup> Here, there are nuances concerning the reasons for the Poland's fall, which is certainly not meaningless in this instance, given that the post-colonial perspective once again divides the world of Polish history between victims and perpetrators. Let us agree that violence has occurred, one way or the other. But was it post-colonial violence? Did Poland lose its right to self-representation after the partitions? In some ways, yes: actions undertaken by the censorship office made it difficult to send messages outside, to an audience in the West. We know the term "cordon" and the difficulties involved in traversing its borders. However, the function of representing Polish culture and Polish interests by free Poles (or even those who were not free) did not disappear. It survived in many different, more or less perfect, forms (art created through emigration, transfers through Aesop's speech, contraband enabling access to forbidden books, etc.). Perhaps yet another situation, mentioned only briefly and in passing in Cavanagh's text, is closer to the post-colonial perspective as understood by Said: it is possible that after the Second World War we were a land of political and cultural exoticism for the West that was explained through proximity to communist ideology, or in the spirit of pragmatics resulting from the post-Yalta agreements. But even here, it is hard to decidedly state that this was the prevailing interpretation of post-War Polish history in the West, that there were no alternatives, including those formulated by the Polish native speakers.

Cavanagh's article refers primarily to the post-colonialism identified with the relations between Poland and Russia. The impossibility of including those relations in the post-colonial scheme is manifested, in my opinion, by the influence – unthinkable in the post-colonial relationship – that Polish culture has exerted over Russian readers and Russian culture in general. Of course, one can always say that the works published in Russia have been subject to censorship. However, it seems that the corrections forced on the works have not changed the tone or the message of the novels in any significant way, but obviously one can always debate that statement in the end. Let us just say that the reception of Orzeszkowa's work in Russia meant translations simultaneous with the first Polish editions, polemics with her works, rich correspondence between the author and her Russian readers, often very intimate. Kazimierz Zdziechowski,

8 Cavanagh, C. "Postcolonial Poland," *Common Knowledge*, vol. 10.1, 2004, 82-92.

who at the end of the 19th century studied in Russia, kept assuring the writer that she was being widely read by the Russian youth and that even those who preferred to play cards and avoid reading knew her name. It was similar with Sienkiewicz. He was translated and read. Slightly less popular were Prus, Kononicka and Kraszewski. There was a celebration held in honor of Mickiewicz's birthday in Petersburg in 1898. Also, in other historical periods Polish culture seemed attractive to the Russian audience. The reverse influence, of Russia over the "Polish soul," is also of great importance. Authors such as Miciński, Żeromski, Zdziechowski, or the already mentioned Orzeszkowa, all wrote about that aspect. The influence was usually judged critically and Russian culture was perceived as a source of nihilism, socialism, or communism. The assessment was nevertheless not so simple or straightforward, as such caricatures might suggest, particularly if we manage to reject the stereotypes which tells us to treat the above mentioned ideas as an alien imports and the products of discursive violence imposed from the outside. Even the fascination in question has a far more complicated genesis and cannot be fully expressed in one scheme. Clare Cavanagh regretfully suggests as much:

*Heart of Darkness* (1898) is a key, if controversial, text for postcolonial critics, while the connection between the novel and the country that Norman Davies has called "the heart of Europe" remains at best sketchy. Miłosz and Zdzisław Najder have labored to show how Conrad brought his Eastern European experience to bear in chronicling the growth of Western empires, but the impact of their efforts has been minimal.<sup>9</sup>

The position of Conrad in creating a Polish post-colonial discourse is fundamental.<sup>10</sup> He was supposed to evaluate the influence of both empires: that of the West and Russia on the fate of countries and nations at the crossing of major political trails. He was supposed to expose East and West, a double man – a *homo duplex*. But by politicizing Conrad, we ruin the existential gesture that has established him as a great writer, since it opened the path to his artistic fulfillment: we tend to forget that he wanted to run away from political dependencies and the weight of patriotic tradition. And even if that escape was not entirely successful, if he had been writing just as before, through conscious or unconscious references to the Polish past, the change of place and language remains a factor in understanding Conrad's condition, as well as the condition of his works. He is a sign of far larger complications and lack of proper exposure than those mentioned by Cavanagh. Conrad once wrote that "*Homo*

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9 Ibid.

10 Moore calls upon Conrad's example in his previously mentioned work as well.

*duplex* has in my case more than one meaning.”<sup>11</sup> This duality of Conrad is not a duality stemming entirely from his European and Polish identity, from him being torn between the East and West, or his Polish past and British present, as Cavanagh would like. It is a duality coming from the conviction that in order to live one’s own life, one has to forsake this enormous and terrifying Polish heritage. In one of his books – *Prince Roman* – about the ruthless imperative of the love of a motherland formulated by the Polish culture, he added: “There is something terrifying in the very thought about those postulates.”<sup>12</sup> Conrad turned away from that terrifying prospect, he moved away not only to escape imperial violence, but also to avoid a symbolic, Polish, and patriotic, violence.

But when writing about the importance of Conrad’s case in the aforementioned circumstances, foreign scholars are limited by circumstances in their reception of the message sent by Polish speaking authors, they turn to his works in order to illustrate with his indirect prose a thesis, which does not need any extraordinary proofs: Russia has committed violent acts. But were they post-colonial acts of violence, and hence grounded on absolute otherness combined with domination? Conrad himself, in his biography, went back to the themes of Pan-Slavism (his cool headed uncle kept discouraging him from them) and, according to dr. Bernard Meyer, the poor health condition of the writer after the publication of *Under Western Eyes* was partially caused by the author’s identification with the Slavic spirit. Colonial theory has never heard of such a case.<sup>13</sup>

The general situation is far more complicated than that of Conrad’s and absolutely fundamental for understanding the scale of advantages introduced by the post-colonial perspective for thinking about Polish culture. It seems that post-colonialism takes away the relative independence and freedom of biographers and works of art. It challenges every attempt to step outside political stereotypes. The unfortunate weight of Polish history which hierarchized the subject of research interests for years by imposing a field of problematics and the language of description (for example, the themes of fighting for independence in the Romantic period and most of the 19th century) keeps coming back, demanding us to follow the political dependencies of every gesture at each stage. Since even Conrad was unable to escape that mode of thinking, what are the writers living for years under Russia’s yoke supposed

11 Conrad, J. *Listy*, edited by Z. Najder, translated by H. Carroll-Najder, s. 223, Warszawa: PIW, 1968; after C. Cavanagh *Postcolonial Poland*.

12 Najder, Z. *Życie Conrada-Korzeniowskiego*, vol. 2, p. 143, Warszawa: Alfa, 1980.

13 Bhabha’s theory will not be useful in this case, no matter how much we would like it to be. See Bhabha, H. “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse.”

to do? Clare Cavanagh quotes poems by the few contemporary Polish poets who, according to her, directly, or in a more “masked” manner express their attitude toward the Russian empire. But she does not mention those who wanted to turn their attention away from political thinking. Sometimes, those were the same people caught in a different moment of life, in different roles, different states of imagination. For example, Miłosz or Zagajewski, both reveal political conditioning and strive toward the rejection of any historical ballast. They are also a part of the broad category of “double men,” functioning on home soil. Dually double.

There are also others who carry a burden of a duality understood in an entirely different way. Such as Prus, who experienced the political character of his times personally and continued to convey, in *Lalka* and his other works, a message of a peculiar kind when seen from our perspective: it is not politics that is important, but existence, or life. The fact that one is. In existence, that which is important comes to us from the outside. It happens. It takes place. We have no influence, no ultimate influence over groundbreaking existential events: birth, love and death. Wokulski is frustrated and helpless when faced by this perspective. If so, is there a reason to be preoccupied with details? Fight for whatever is left over? Not only politics, but a social life, career, and money – all of that fades when confronted by the fundamentally undefeatable markers of human fate.

The attempt to draw attention to the fact that Poland was colonized by Russia in the period of partitions does not bring any new revelations. In any case, it is hard to combine this idea of colonization with a common conviction that was challenged by only the most courageous publicists of the 19th century (among others by Aleksander Świętochowski) that we are above Russia; Russia which was identified with Asian culture, barbarity and savageness. The thesis about post-war colonization is in conflict with thinking based on the same beliefs: that we are better, more cultured and civilized. Is an uncivilized savage capable of conquest? Yes. But can he perform an act of colonization as understood by Said? In my opinion, no. Ewa Domańska, when analyzing the Festival of Soviet Songs in Zielona Góra and, in particular, video recordings from the concerts that became a hit of 1989, ascribes features of a farce to them: the Polish audience laughs at what the recordings show, for example, at footage from the war that was edited in the concert’s recording. By acting in such manner, the audience confirms its affiliation with the past epoch and its dependence on the standards imposed by the aggressor.<sup>14</sup> Is that a proper

14 Domańska, E. “Obrazy PRL-u w perspektywie postkolonialnej”, in *Obrazy PRL-u*, edited by K. Brzechczyn, Poznań: IPN, 2008. Available also on-line: <http://www.staff.amu.edu.pl/~ewa/Domanska,%20Obrazy%20PRL%20w%20perspektywie%20postkolonialnej.pdf>



explanation for the scene in question? Is that the only explanation available? And is closer to the truth? Does Bhabha's theory about mimicry and mimicking the behavior of the colonizer fit? Maybe the festival in Zielona Góra was accepted by the audience as a whole, without entering into political analysis? Maybe the festival, when watched as a part of a series of the funniest film chronicles from the People's Republic of Poland, was funny in a different way? Maybe there is nostalgia hidden behind the smile, nostalgia not for the old regime, but for the communal fun we used to experience in days past? Or maybe it is sympathy toward Russia, more present than we assume, which returns when it is not forced? If the post-colonial perspective would serve to revise accumulated myths and prejudice, there would be reasons to introduce it. However, if the only profit coming from its introduction is the reaffirmation of stereotypes about the involvement of our fate in a geo-political situation that still exists, not as a tragedy but as farce – in a form that is devoid of an uplifting character – maybe there is no reason to try.

More convincing, I believe, is the effort to activate the colonizers' perspective from the other side; that is, to put Poles in the role of the colonizers, and not the colonized.<sup>15</sup> It seems that such a perspective makes sense with regard to particular places and times, thinking of the application of the politics of colonization to the Eastern Borderlands at different times in history. The Borderlands fulfill all the requirements established by Said: these areas were, for the Polish observer, the embodiment of the exotic; they were not entirely savage, but certainly culturally “younger,” and they were subject to replaced representation in language and literature for much longer. The Polish politics of colonization have been discussed and written about previously, before Said wrote his seminal works: Daniel Beauvois and later Czesław Miłosz, Bogusław Bakuła Aleksander Fiut, German Ritz, and Hanna Gosek have written about it, for example. But first was Józef Obrębski.

An outstanding Polish sociologist and ethnologist, he wrote, as we know, not about the Eastern Borderlands, but about Polesia.<sup>16</sup> Not all of the theories

15 Among Polish works dedicated to the subject of post-colonialism, precisely works concerned with Eastern Borderlands seem to be the most interesting, in particular: Fiut, A. “Polonizacja? Kolonizacja?” *Teksty Drugie*, issue 6, 2003; Bakuła, B. “Kolonialne i postkolonialne aspekty polskiego dyskursu kresoznawczego (zarys problematyki),” *Teksty Drugie*, issue 6, 2006.

16 Obrębski's works about Polesia, bibliography, as well as a list of works on the author one can find in Obrębski, J. *Studia etnosociologiczne*, vol. 1: *Polesia*, edited by A. Engelking, Warsaw: Oficyna Naukowa, 2007; quotes from that work I will be localizing as follows: title of the essay, P, page number. I have written about the achievements of Józef Obrębski as a scholar of Polesia in the article “Daleko od mitu. Kresy według Obrębskiego,” in *Prace Filologiczne. Seria Literaturoznawcza*, 2008. I will use some of the conclusions from that article in this work.

pertaining to *Polesia* can be transferred onto the Eastern Borderlands, but some of them can be transposed and generalized. The author himself mentioned this fact in one of his later works. When pointing to the phenomenon of a violent clash of primitive culture with the civilization in the 19th century, he concluded the following:

[This process] is not an individual characteristic of Polesia. Polesia shares it with [the whole area of the] Eastern Borderlands, as well as with Euro-Asian Soviet villages, tribes of Congo and the society of Morocco, Indochina and Siam. It shares it, in general, with all the areas that, while being a place of contact between different cultures, races and civilizations, but firstly a stage of conflict between the primitive culture and civilization, display similar phenomena and face similar problems [and show only particular examples and phases of the entire process]. ("Dzisiejsza wieś polska," *P*, 33-34)

Which features of the villages of Polesia can we approach *pars pro toto* as the features of the Eastern Borderlands? Firstly, the contrast between the peasantry and nobility. This contrast is a feature of the old Poland in general, but in Polesia and the Eastern Borderlands it takes up a radical form: the gap between the poor, the falling apart of peasant homes, slightly more comfortable than the manger and the magnificent palaces of the magnates, built on the endless latifundium is vast. When commenting on Kraszewski's work, *Wspomnienia Polesia, Wołyń i Litwy* (1860), Obrębski wrote:

The image of Polesia, commemorated by Kraszewski, is not an image of peasant paradise. It is an image of a peasant life in a land of masters, land of princes and magnates, ex-princes and "Borderland Bisons" (term used for nobility - trans.). On his path, only once has Kraszewski stumbled upon the visible sign of the royal, hidden underneath the cloak of peasantry, when, while in the local tavern, he saw a richly embellished carriage with four horses, carrying a group of nonchalant golden youth of Polesia's nobility. A peasant cottage, half way sunk in the ground, half-naked peasants and a parade carriage are not only elements of Polesia's landscape but symbols of Polesia's social structure: its simultaneous royalty and peasantry. ("Polesia archaiczne," *P*, 33-34)

Nowhere else and never before has the contrast between the masters and their subjects been so stark and the division of the society into castes so radical as in the Eastern Borderlands in the times before enfranchisement. Nowhere else and never before have the differences between the castes meant such deep gap: on the one hand "the most noble species of the Polish magnate – princes of the Borderlands, on the other the lowest kind of

peasant – Russian *mużyk*” (Ibid., *P*, p. 34). Never before and nowhere before have the differences between the master and the peasant been so great: they were divided by everything, including language and faith.

The Borderlands were helpful – according to Obrębski – in not only creating magnate fortunes, but also in developing the very concept of royal nobility. Far from the king and the court, the rich magnate was the master of life and death for his subjects. The idea of noble democracy turned out to be a fiction. Being dependent from the magnate made the nobility into his obedient tool. Radziwiłł, my Dearest Sir, “runs his almost kingly court in Nieśwież and saw a king as a parvenu” (Ibid., *P*, p. 37). It was not different among the families of Potocki, Czartoryski, Ostrogski or Sapiecha. The elegance and wealth were combined in the Borderland mansions, or even in the manors of nobility with an incredible splendor and “oriental pompousness,” according to Obrębski. On top of that, this Borderland lifestyle ostentatiously cut itself from its surroundings and disconnected itself from the country, as Kraszewski used to write: from “forest, sand, mud, and plains.” An arbor in Radziwiłł’s Alba was stylized after the Hagia Sophia Basilica in Istanbul, tables in Nieśwież carried the most exotic dishes, including reindeer meat and the treasuries were filled with the most beautiful gems and pearls of the world. When listing, following the scholars researching the pre-partition era, all of the goods found in the Borderland mansions and manors, Obrębski highlights that they were not connected with any individual tastes of the magnates. This was the official lifestyle of the entire nobility:

[An] institution that created bonds of mutual dependency between the spenders and gainers, givers and receivers; an institution that trapped allies and friends, regulated increases and decreases in personal clout and popularity, at the same time pointing to proper place in the diverse and complex hierarchy of the world of nobility. It was also a means of expression of master’s capability to waste (Ibid., *P*, 42).

Such a lifestyle, in the post-partition era, made the common acceptance of the political *status quo* easier. New inhabitants of the magnate mansions, such as Tutolmin, the governor of the empress in Nieśwież, after taking over the estates and wealth of the magnates, had no problem with acquiring support of the local nobility. He would organize extravagant parties and recruit noble youth to the Russian army. Obrębski highlights that this royal lifestyle did not disappear after the partitions. Owners of the huge estates spent fortunes on beautiful china, one-piece glass imported from St. Petersburg, crystal lamps, bronzes, antiques, expansive fabrics imported from Lyon, or extravagant foods and alcohols from all over:

The court of magnate was a focus of everything that was most unique, expensive, best quality and sublime in the country and abroad. But the source of that luxury was in the work of an uneducated Russian *mużyk*, who, under the yoke of the court, using the strength of his muscles and primitive tools he built himself, turned the fruits of Polesia's soil into a product and a merchandise that was shipped to the same foreign markets that provided the expensive artifacts and tokens of the royal lifestyle. In the great magnate economies, a whole army of servants, economists and overseers overlooked the whole process; a process that turned peasant's work and life into the master's wealth and the wealthy possessions of the master. In the modest manors of self-supporting gentry [PL: *hreczkosiej*] this complicated apparatus was reduced to a simple noble chest and a whip. And that is why, even though not every mansion resembled Versailles, each of them had something in common with the Bastille. (Ibid., P, 43-44)

For Obrębski, it is obvious that thanks only to the primitive peasant and the land, the whole outburst of Borderland culture could have shone with its brightest light:

Without the land and without the peasant, mansion turned into a common hut – and the master turned not entirely into a gentry and not entirely into a peasant himself, but into a peculiar mixture of both: a backwoods noble, who with the scraps of royal culture fed his illusions of his royal creed and with his stately megalomania covered the reality of peasant-like existence. (Ibid., P, 44)

This very process, already observed by Kraszewski in the time between the uprisings, intensifies after the enfranchisement.

The Eastern Borderlands were a breeding ground not only for social contrasts. They were also a prolific ground for an economy of exploitation. The resources of Borderland's nature seemed infinite. And they were being used without any limitations. Forests and vast swamps were a natural habitat for many animal species. Wild boars, moose, deer, hares and bears were hunted. Not only single animals, but dozens at once were hunted, using nets that made the whole process incredibly efficient. There was also fishing: Sturgeon, ruff and loach were so vast in number that one could pick them out by hand when the water levels were low. From some of the accounts we learn that pigs sometimes went to the river to feed on fish that jumped right in their mouths! Beavers were popular game. Kazimierz Kontrym, author of *Podróż po Polesiu*, published in 1839 wrote: "They hunt for them with nets called *żelazo* on the paths they make in the snow when leave their homes and come back. Sometimes

they catch them in *kliny* (a type of net) they use to fish by the mills.” (quote after: *Ibid.*, P, 51) The same observer debates the thesis of Borderlands’ magnates breeding cattle from Switzerland and Tyrol on their estates. He is of the opinion that the new breeds were imported for fun, without regard for costs. But the scene of the most prevalent and intensive exploitation is the forest. Trees are cut down in massive quantities and processed on the spot and turned into planks. Some of the trees are floated immediately and some are used for heating. Tar and potash are produced on a massive scale. Factories and manufacturing craftsmanship are a rarity, on the other hand. Sometimes one might encounter factories producing fabric, soap, porcelain, or iron tools. Thirty years later, when the enfranchisement reform put an end to the feudal system in the Eastern Borderlands, the economic model remained almost entirely the same. The nobility saves itself from debt with lumbering and forest exploitation and the peasants will look there for food, killing even the game that is under protection. The example came from above.

Obrębski’s reflection combines two spheres of reality that are separated in other discourses: social radicalism and a nostalgic attachment to the culture of Polish nobility. The scholar shows an irreducible connection between the two; a combination of violence and the mechanisms that create culture:

Speculating with the forest and the peasant resources in the most basic and easiest way changed the master’s right of ownership of the land and man into the master’s goods and consumption artifacts. By destroying the forest and the peasant, the speculation turned a prosaic element of the peasant’s landscape of Polesia into poetry and the charm of the master’s Borderland mansion and his cultural – both homegrown and exotic – wonders. This poetry and charm, the same in a small manor and mansion, were the mainspring of economic activity of a noble landowner and the main goal of his backwards, exploitative, wasteful and irrational managing of resources. A noble landowner was a type of consumer-landowner and not a producer; an eater and not a creator of goods. (*Ibid.*, P, 69)

If we were to add the problems stemming from serfdom, the right of the first night, punishments, forced draft, etc., we are bound to ask if the peasant from the Eastern Borderlands suffered more than the one from central Poland. It seems that a feeling of alienation was another element composing his otherness: cultural, linguistic and religious otherness. Master-the-oppressor turned into *Lach*-the-oppressor:

The myth of a *Lach*-the-oppressor was not some regional passing literary theme in the peasant traditions of Polesia. Its genesis was in the centuries of the history of Russian peasantry within the borders of the Polish

Commonwealth, in the historical processes of expansion of Polish culture and the Polish nation's nobility on the ethnically Russian territories. In those lands, being Polish was historically combined with oppression and peasant slavery. Serfdom and being one's subject were not a local invention, the creation of a spontaneous evolutionary processes of the local Russian-Lithuanian society. These were Polish imports, brought and installed along with the political expansion of the Polish nobility on the Russian territory. (Ibid., P, 107)

Obrębski does not use metaphors, he calls things by their name and ruthlessly deals with the Borderlands' myth. His achievement rests with creating a logical cause-and-effect narration describing the relations between the master and the servant and providing the final word in the matter of genesis of the Borderlands' culture. The Borderlands, according to Obrębski, are a space of imposed power, one that does not care for the locals, is ruthless toward people and exploitative toward nature. Borderlands are a space of huge contrasts between the royalty (wealth) and peasantry (poverty and violence). The high culture of the Borderlands region is a direct effect of exploitative Polish politics toward stolen land. *Muzyk's* hut and the magnate's mansion are two sides of the same coin. The wealth and power of those clans were built with peasant's suffering. He has his own, specific and almost entirely silent input into the legend of the Eastern Borderlands of the Polish Commonwealth.

Obrębski was a myth destroyer, but this was never his primary goal. Anna Engelking recollects, in the introduction to his works, that the scholar planned on writing a polemic with a functioning myth of the natives of Polesia. (Ibid., P, 28-29) From the remaining fragments, we can conclude that the sociologist was not interested in the relationship between social reality and literary fiction. He assumed that works of art "are not a form of research analysis, but a literary montage of social sentiments, or – despite all the masquerade – simply a myth and a legend." ("Legenda leśnych ludzi," P, 438) He was more interested in compromising pseudo-knowledge about the Polish Borderlands, propagated by the regime in the twenties and thirties, or in the words of Said – the colonial discourse of the authorities:

Chapters dedicated to Polesia in different journals, these special issues about the region, photographs of Polesia natives, or the samples of landscape, pseudo-ethnographical, pseudo-informative, or propaganda articles, etc. – these are the bits and pieces of, today obviously crystallized, well designed according to the subject and coherent from the literary perspective, legend of the people of the forest. Pseudo-objective, semi-informative and somewhat ethnographic character of this type of

production should not mislead anyone. Despite all the attempts to look objective, these are nothing else but propaganda. There is no objective, critical, or scientific information to be found there. Their form, their pseudo-scientific character, is extremely characteristic of the contemporary way of myth creation. In order to sanction its claims, it will turn to the repository of already used up and cliched religious dogmas that keep hiding behind the halo of the, still rising in power, authority of science. (*Ibid.*, *P*, 438)

Obrębski paid special attention to exposing a certain type of “reading” of the Polish Eastern Borderlands. Anna Engelking, his editor and a commentator on his works, was right when she looked for the inspirations for his theoretical stands, on the one hand in Bronisław Malinowski’s functionalism, on the other in the humanistic sociology of Florian Znaniecki. Both those inspirations had one thing in common – an attempt to see through the described world, based on a conviction about the closeness of both the researcher and his subject and about the possibility of mutual understanding. I believe, however, that Obrębski’s stand is not exhaustively described by those analogies. When writing passionately about the paradoxical connection between the magnate mansions and the slave labor of a Russian boy, Obrębski calls upon the Marxist ideology as well. And it is no accident that his great works seem to be so similar to the essays of Walter Benjamin. They are fundamentally different, of course, in that Benjamin described the beginnings of capitalism, early modernity, the development of the city and contemporary technology, while Obrębski remained the scholar of Polish-Russian poverty, the archaic village and its backwardness.

Wonderful in terms of style and methodology, based on years of field studies, Obrębski’s articles were created in the 1930s. The pioneering character of his studies in the Eastern Borderlands against the post-colonial perspective is obvious, but this is not what interests me the most. Maybe, in some other parts of the world, similar observations have been made, ones that we do not know about because of the “exotic” (“exotic” for us, because that designation is always for someone) character of their subject and the language of the study. Something else is much more surprising: a total omission of that cognitive tradition in Polish post-colonial discourse that seems to be developing very energetically. Why do we try – in my opinion forcefully and without critical thought – to adapt “oriental” problematics to the Polish reality, while paying so little attention to homegrown “colonialism” and solid works on that subject? The answer to my question, however, is an entirely different story.

*Translation: Jan Pytalski*