

STEFAN ŻEROMSKI'S *ASHES* AS A POSTCOLONIAL NARRATIVE

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ABSTRACT

Stefan Żeromski's historical novel *Popioły* [Ashes] (1904) is usually interpreted as a narrative about the Napoleonic wars, particularly about Napoleon's campaign in Spain. The paper argues that the fast-moving war plot conceals the philosophical question to which Żeromski tried to provide an answer: did the Austrian empire represent a superior way of organizing human society, or was the liberty of the Polish "Sarmatian" republic a more appropriate answer to the question of how to live? The issue is indirectly contested by virtually all characters. It comes to a head in the relationship between two seemingly secondary characters, the Austrian tax collector Hibl and the Polish landowner Nardzewski. The former resembles William Faulkner's Flem Snopes; the latter, the noble families of the Sartoris defeated in the Civil War. Like in Faulkner's novels, there is an unmistakable suggestion of *gloria victis* in Żeromski's opus. Unlike Faulkner, Żeromski brings to bear the issue of white-on-white colonialism in Europe, and the paper's author suggests that the eighteenth-century seizure of parts of Poland by Europe's three continental empires was an instance of European colonialism that delayed the development of non-Germanic Central Europe and eventually brought about twentieth-century European wars.

KEYWORDS: colonialism, Galicia, Sarmatism, Stefan Żeromski, Jerzy Turowicz, liberty, republicanism, absolutism



During a trip to Poland in the 1970s I visited the headquarters of *Tygodnik Powszechny* in Kraków. Its editor, Jerzy Turowicz, proudly displayed in his office a portrait of Franz Joseph, Emperor of Austria and Hungary.¹ From our conversation I learned that he was a great admirer of the Emperor. According to him, under the reign of the Habsburgs Kraków was a truly international city, and its artistic and intellectual life was flourishing.



¹ The fact that the communist regime allowed the display of Franz Joseph's portrait while forbidding to display Józef Piłsudski's pictures indicates the fostering of the suggestion that Poles are unable to maintain an independent state. Piłsudski was a symbol of such a state, while Franz Joseph symbolized submission to a foreign power.

Turowicz was not interested in the fact that Vienna was also the capital of an empire obtained not by proclamations of multiculturalism, but in the customary manner: thorough violence.² He did not want to know that Galicia was chronically underfunded and exploited by the Viennese authorities.³ He was not interested in the fact that, as an irate blogger stated recently, “there has never been any Galicia in Poland! It is an ahistorical and contrived name of the Austrian partition, administratively imposed and distasteful to the Poles”.⁴

Turowicz's views were related to the fact that he was a patriot of the Enlightenment rather than a Polish patriot. He believed in the Enlightenment slogans of freedom, brotherhood, and equality, based on the premise that national identity is an obstacle rather than a prerequisite for building a just and successful society.⁵ In his time it was still possible to believe in such utopias, because the problem of white-on-white European colonialism had not yet penetrated the *Weltanschauung* of East European intellectuals. These concepts are difficult to accept today, when the world view of virtually all societies is permeated by postcolonial awareness and political scientists positing that the existence of a coherent national community is a necessary, although not sufficient, factor in safeguarding human rights in a given territory.⁶

After a visit to Kraków I went to the Polish Tatras, not to the well-known resort of Zakopane but rather to places whose names speak for themselves: Głodówka, Nędzówka, and Obrochłówka. (Hunger, Misery, Animal Fodder). Stefan Żeromski's novel *Ashes* [1902-1903] adds Mrzygłód (Death-by-Hunger) to this list.⁷ The names of the villages stand in sharp contrast

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2 Details of the Austrian seizure of Kraków and of the voivodships of Sandomierz and Kraków can be found in T. Mencel, *Galicja Zachodnia 1795-1809*, Lublin 1976, p. 14 ff.

3 Mencel concludes: “The brutal system of exploitation of Western Galicia by Austrians caused resentment and hatred for the new government, and the period 1806-1809 showed that under favorable circumstances the unexpired national sentiment would erupt in a powerful way.” T. Mencel, *op. cit.*, p. 450. As Marc Ben-Joseph states, the situation did not change much in the second half of the nineteenth century: M. Ben-Joseph, *Adversities of Autonomy: Bank Krajowy Królestwa Galicyi i Lodomeryi and the Politics of Credit in Galicia, 1870-1913*, Kraków 1999.

4 <http://forum.fronda.pl/?akcja=pokaz&id=2977249>.

5 B. Wildstein, *Apologia Kaczyńskiego*, “Rzeczpospolita” Plus Minus, 5 December 2009.

6 M. Canovan, *Nationhood and Political Theory*, Cheltenham 1996. Today, however, Austrians seem to be completely insensitive to postcolonial problems, as demonstrated by a recent survey of history schoolbooks: M. Andrzejewski, *Obraz Polski w austriackich podręcznikach szkolnych do historii*, “Echa przeszłości”, vol. 9, ed. by W. Gieszczyński, Olsztyn 2008, pp. 241-254.

7 S. Żeromski, *Popioły*, vol. 2, Warszawa 1983, p. 300 [*Ashes*, trans. by H. Stankiewicz, New York-London 1928].

to the joyous identification of Polish Galicia with Franz Joseph, Viennese cafés and that gentle and happy atmosphere that supposedly characterized the late Habsburg Empire. Żeromski's novel *Ashes* shows the unsightly side of that empire. It is a declaration of disagreement with idealization of the Austrian partition and the model of state management used in its territory. From the postcolonial point of view, it is a novel about people and territories forced, in spite of bloody resistance, to become the periphery of an empire. The Old Republic of Poland was not a glorious metropolis, but it was still a metropolis. Colonization transformed and divided this metropolis into provinces of three empires, with all the consequences that a transformation of this kind brings.⁸ The so-called Polish Sarmatism, from which the heroes of *Ashes* derive endowed citizens of "Sarmatian" Poland with a sense of self-worth and liberty. Austrian colonization destroyed their liberty and compelled the Poles to serve the interests of their conquerors. *Ashes* is a narrative of the Sarmatian culture that survived among the nobility with pedigrees and estates, and was also potentially present among smallholders with no pedigree and no assets. The novel suggests that it is not necessary to be a noble to possess the sense of liberty that the Republic of Poland developed and cultivated.

In Central and Eastern Europe the articulation of colonial processes and mechanisms is still inadequate. There is no awareness that colonialism differs from "ordinary" conquests that took place before the formation of national and language identities. The effects of precolonial conquests were not as traumatic as that of colonial appropriation.⁹ In contrast to those earlier conquests, European colonialism of white against white was exceptionally destructive. In the nineteenth century, i.e., the period of formation of modern societies, Polish society was obliged to expend its energies on defending identity rather than on normal multidirectional development. While German and French communities used their time, energy, and resources to develop economy and culture, countries such as Ireland, Scotland, Finland, and Poland wasted their social energy on responding to changes imposed on them by foreigners.

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⁸ Metropolis and periphery are discussed in greater detail in E. Thompson, *Postkolonialne refleksje. Na marginesie pracy zbiorowej From Sovietology to Postcoloniality, "Porównania"*, 5 (2008), pp. 113–126.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 113–126.

Ashes can be interpreted as a recognition of this process. This three-volume novel begins with a hunting scene in the Świętokrzyskie Mountains, shortly after the third partition of Poland sealed the fate of territories near Kraków and Sandomierz. One of the main characters in the novel is Rafał Olbromski, whose parents and uncle live in the lands annexed by the Habsburgs. Rafał goes hunting with his uncle Nardzewski. Upon their return home they encounter a visitor to Nardzewski's estate: an imperial official named Hibl, who arrived because Nardzewski was in arrears regarding state taxes.

It should be noted here that in the eighteenth century the collection of taxes in Polish territory was a complicated issue. When the Austrian army entered the lands of the Republic, the issue of taxes was decided in an arbitrary manner unknown in Poland at that time. Additionally, some properties were taken away from their owners as punishment for participation in the uprisings.¹⁰ In the Republic all taxes had to be voted on by the Sejm (Parliament) in a manner similar to that prevailing in contemporary democratic societies. The king could not levy taxes without the consent of the Sejm. Part of the income from church properties was used to maintain charitable establishments. One can imagine the chaos and misery generated by taking these assets because an individual or an institution failed to pay the Austrian taxes. While in free Poland the income from royal estates supported the Polish army, in colonized Poland that income was sent to Vienna. The Austrians decreed that the nobility were obliged to see to it that the chimney tax and land tax (paid by peasants) as well as the 10 groszy tax (paid by the nobility) were sent in on time.¹¹ This last tax was passed by the Four-Year Sejm (the last free parliamentary gathering in Rzeczpospolita) but it was implemented only after Poland's loss of independence, of course in favor of the invader.

When the Republic was in decline Nardzewski did not pay this tax because the weakened central authorities did not have the means to put into practice the reform of the Four-Year Sejm. He was not obliged to pay other taxes because his estate had recently been created. His grandfather founded the village with money saved from his military salary. He bought an uncultivated piece of land and made it arable with the help of landless peasants to whom he offered settlement. Feudal relations prevailed in his

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10 T. Mencil, *Galicja Zachodnia 1795–1809*, Lublin 1976.

11 *Ibid.*, pp. 27–29, 60–61.

village: in exchange for peasant labor the Nardzewski family would help out his smallholders if natural disaster or illness struck. Nardzewski himself served in the army of the Republic; after the final defeat he returned to his estate and settled there permanently. His Sarmatian naiveté made him believe that the world would forget about him too. But under the pretext of enforcing the reform of the Four-Year Sejm, imperial officials began to impose on the nobility the so-called “Commonwealth knightly class perpetual sacrifice for the army”.¹² Additionally, arbitrary laws defined in detail peasants’ obligations to the landlord (i.e., how many days a week the smallholder had to work on his landlord’s land and how many on his own) and demanded that landowners supervise the recruitment of peasants into the army. Nardzewski was notified about all these duties in official letters, but he did not read them. As suggested by the narrator, Nardzewski considered himself a free man and sovereign of his own village. He followed the belief that “nothing about us without us”, i.e., taxes and other obligations can only be adopted at the local councils of the nobility and then approved by the Sejm of the Republic; only then would they become law. These duties could not be imposed from Vienna. He believed in this social model because it had proved itself to be viable for many generations of his ancestors.

As we learn from his conversation with Hibl, being in arrears concerning taxes and army recruitment was not Nardzewski’s only trespass. He had also failed to fulfill other obligations imposed by the colonialists, such as the “voluntary” trip to Kraków on the occasion of the visit to Kraków of Austrian Emperor Franz II.¹³ Hibl is a Germanized Czech, the type of official who serves “those at the top” regardless of who they are and what they do. Hibl’s appearance at Nardzewski’s house takes place at the beginning of the narrative, thus suggesting that the visit will play a significant role in the novel. Hibl symbolizes the option that is the opposite of the Sarmation option. The central idea of Hibl’s world is not liberty, but rather order and control. Hibl emphasizes the fact that the act of oaths to Franz II in Kraków “was held in the greatest order”.¹⁴ The question is not whether it was the right thing to do, but only whether

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12 A. Achmatowicz, “Przypisy”, in: *Popioły*, vol. 1, p. 320–321; A. Chwalba, *Historia Polski 1795–1918*, Kraków 2000, pp. 506–507.

13 T. Mencil, *op. cit.*, pp. 56–57.

14 *Ashes*, I:46.

proper decorum was maintained. Reducing the two options (Sarmatism vs. order and control, freedom vs. unfreedom) to the sobriety of realism and recklessness of Romanticism reduces the problem to a high-school-level discussion. In fact, the roots of this choice run much deeper and have to do with patterns of self-realization based on fundamentally different philosophical assumptions.

Hibl's order is shallow; it can be called nominalistic. In this order the value system is not immanent to reality, but rather constructed by humans. It changes depending on the historical moment and the kind of human community involved. Enumerating Nardzewski's trespasses in the area of tax collection and administrative negligence, Hibl shows the satisfaction experienced by pedants who have everything organized on their desk and around them. The pedant does not ask about long-term meaning of what he does or about the objectives of his actions: the order and control associated with it are objectives in themselves. Hibl looks down on Nardzewski as someone who represents primitive Polish chaos.

Let us not forget, however, that Hibl's sense of superiority is based not only on his predilection for keeping order, but also on the law of violence. Hibl believes in what Nardzewski despises, namely, that force will and should overcome the right to freedom. Therefore order turns out to be something derivative and secondary, while the highest values are force and violence. The ordered society is a smokescreen for the law of the jungle. Hibl is the only character in the novel who knows in advance that Nardzewski is doomed to fail, that his estate will be destroyed, or even, in the extreme case that seems to be anticipated by Hibl's sadistic irony, that he will be put to death by Austrian soldiers.

On the other hand, Nardzewski is a typical Sarmatian. He treats the uninvited visit of the Austrian officer as a violation of his rights against which he is allowed to protect himself on the basis of the *neminem captivabimus* privilege, granted to the nobility of the Republic in 1430.¹⁵ It should be noted here that in modern democratic societies a certain variety of *neminem captivabimus* also functions: the state cannot invade a citizen's house or apartment without probable cause, and the citizen cannot be imprisoned without such a cause either. In the modern United States a judge must give permission for the police to enter a private house. In the empires that defeated Poland such rights did not apply; the emperor had full

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 15 The nobility was deprived of this privilege by the Austrians. T. Mencil, *op.cit.*, p. 78.

legislative and judicial power. Here, then, the Sarmatian sense of personal freedom collides with autocracy.¹⁶ The Sarmatian right to freedom was not something imposed by violence, as was the case with Hibl's order, but was derived in the opinion of its beneficiaries from the rights granted to man by God. Although religion plays a negligible role in Żeromski's novel, it is hard to imagine Sarmatism without Catholicism in its background. This immanent Catholicism gives Nardzewski the belief that the right to liberty stems from natural law and does not require evidence or discussion. Thus, the narrator leads the reader towards an inevitable conflict.

In his everyday life Nardzewski does not put on airs: he helps the smallholder Kacper carry the game killed in the hunt, and Kacper is more often his companion than his servant. In his conversation with Hibl Nardzewski tells the story of how his village named Wyrwy (Ravines) was created, drawing an idealized picture of feudal relations based on mutual obligations. This way of life, described by the narrator without irony, has been criticized and mocked so many times by Polish and European historians that it is difficult to look at it impartially. However, one should look at the Sarmatian order from the perspective of the solutions possible at that time. In eighteenth-century Europe the alternative was not modern democracy, but imperial autocracy that looked good from the outside, since its short-term result was usually the state's political power and managerial efficiency. However, it must be remembered that Prussian or Austrian absolutism were closer to Russian *samoderzhaviye* rather than to a democratic society of free men, not to mention the fact that the change of political system and imperial appropriation of church estates did not abolish peasant poverty but instead increased it. It was during the Austrian partition that Nędzówki, Głodówki and Mrzygłody appeared in southern Poland.

Nardzewski is not rich; his table service used during Hibl's visit consists of chipped faience plates. But the welcome is warm and there is plenty of food; Kacper, the peasant playing the role of butler during dinner, salivates while serving the meal because he knows that in a couple of hours he also will eat the same food. Nardzewski allows the dogs to enter the dining room and even put their heads on people's knees—this makes Hibl, who divides living beings into rigid castes, fearful and disgusted.

However, Nardzewski has an unfortunate Sarmatian weakness: the inability to anticipate the possible behavior of others toward himself and

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¹⁶ *Ashes*, I:48.

an inability to imagine that someone might want to deceive him and make a fool of him. In his novel *Wild Palms* [1939], William Faulkner described Polish miners in Utah as people unable to understand dishonesty.¹⁷ Nardzewski's "live and let live" philosophy does not include morally unjustified hostility. In practice, this means recklessness in relation to the world outside one's village and recognizing only those duties one has to one's immediate environment: family, neighbors, subordinate villagers, the land one tills. Nardzewski does not care what is happening in the county town, let alone in the capital. When Poland lost its independence, he holed up in his estate and forgot about the world. Unfortunately, the world, or rather the empire, did not forget about him. The empire exploited the Sarmatian shortcomings that Nardzewski represents so well. He is an example of a fundamental lack of the guile necessary for surviving in the modern world.

When Hibl describes with sadistic enthusiasm the panorama of Kraków celebrating the arrival of the Austrian emperor, Nardzewski's comments become more and more terse. When Hibl tells him about six thousand Polish nobles paying tribute to Emperor Franz and swearing fidelity to the Habsburgs, Nardzewski begins to shoot at the card hanging on the wall. When Hibl announces that the Habsburg empire landowners like Nardzewski must pay taxes in cash and the work of peasant on the landlord's land is controlled by the government, Nardzewski declares that the following day Tomek Zalesiak, one of his peasants, will be punished with 150 whisk strokes for attempted burglary. A few minutes earlier Hibl declared that the state law forbids landlords from beating their peasants. The penalty can only be administered by state officials, as will be the case of the "peasant Sarmate" named Michcik. This is different from the Sarmatian feudal system that Nardzewski considers his own. Perhaps he would not punish Zalesiak had Hibl not appeared, but in this situation he feels he must show whose law is in charge.

The infliction of the flogging is the only possible way for Nardzewski to demonstrate loyalty to the Sarmatian order. He wants to show Hibl that in his code of conduct there is no place for obedience to bureaucrats imposed by force. It is not buffoonery, to which the enemies of Sarmatism reduce this kind of ostentatious behavior; it is an act of desperation of a man trying to remain faithful to his (Polish) state when the state no

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17 W. Faulkner, *Wild Palms*, New York 1939, p. 188: "But they are queer people; they don't understand dishonesty."

longer exists and when the victorious empire punishes him for that loyalty. He takes what is at hand—the opportunity of punishing his peasant for a real transgression. He wants to show that he despises the regulations of the invader who imposes a death penalty for trying to illegally cross the Austrian-Prussian border, while at the same time taking away the lords' right to maintain public order in his estate.

This code of conduct is totally alien to Hibel. However, it is understandable to a penniless peasant named Michcik, whom Nardzewski's nephew Rafał Olbromski meets in Wygnanka, the place of settlement of his older brother Piotr. Michcik fought together with Piotr in the Kościuszko Rising, saved him from death on the battlefield, and stayed with him as a servant, nurse and comrade in arms. He is the one who deals with the farm, serves, cooks, and feeds Piotr the miserable crop of the soil they both cultivate. In the course of this cooperation he transforms himself from a serf into a free man and becomes a Sarmatian no less authentic than his master. He becomes a member of the community, described by Anna Grześkowiak-Krwawicz in the following manner:

Starting with the sixteenth century liberty, love and care for it, and almost constant fear of losing it became permanent elements not only of political discussion, but also of nearly all public statements in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Liberty is perhaps the most frequently occurring word in political treatises, propagandistic pamphlets, in parliamentary, judicial and local council speeches, in sermons and laudations. All these texts portray liberty as the highest value and the dearest treasure of Poles.¹⁸

Michcik appreciates the freedom he earned on the battlefield. In a very Sarmatian way he is not interested in documents and formalities. He believes that Piotr will, or rather already has, released him from servitude. Michcik serves Piotr voluntarily, not like a servant but like a brother—Piotr calls him by that name (I:181). Unfortunately, like Nardzewski, Michcik displays a trustful attitude regarding the world outside Wygnanka, and like Nardzewski he will pay a high price for his lack of prudence.

In the meantime the narrator recounts a conversation between Piotr and Rafał from which we learn that Piotr's *Weltanschauung* was formed

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18 A. Grześkowiak-Krwawicz, *Wolność jako zasada ustrojowa Rzeczypospolitej, Lex est Rex in Polonia et in Lithuania. Tradycje prawno-ustrojowe Rzeczypospolitej—doswiadczenie i dziedzictwo*, Warsaw 2008, p. 25.

in the Szkoła Rycerska, or the Knights' College, founded by Piarist priest Stanisław Konarski and promoting "holy love of the treasured homeland" (Bishop Ignacy Krasicki's poem of that title was the school anthem). Polish historians have labelled Szkoła Rycerska a product of the Enlightenment that broke from the customary Jesuit-controlled education, aiming to be more progressive. Possibly this was true, but the principles that it espoused are very close to the sixteenth-century *Wykład cnoty* (*Treatise on Virtue and Friendship*¹⁹) by Jan Kochanowski, or seventeenth-century's *Prawy szlachcic* (*The Righteous Nobleman*) by Andrzej Radawiecki. In other words, the code of conduct propagated in Szkoła Rycerska was strikingly similar to the ideal of life in Sarmatian Poland, and included the principles of patriotism, honesty, generosity, and willingness to sacrifice—all this was taught in Polish schools in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as well. It is true that in the Korpus Kadetów (Cadet Corps, another name for the Knights' College) less emphasis was put on Latin and more on arithmetic and geometry, less on issue of liberty per se (the love of liberty was so deeply rooted in Polish nobility that further emphasis was no longer required), and more on responsibilities towards the nation. The rules implemented by Szkoła Rycerska were based on the concept of free choice, which since the days of Paweł Włodkowic (1360 - 1435) was an unwritten and self-explanatory foundation of Polishness: I want to be good not because I am told to, but because I choose goodness. This medieval Catholic rule was promoted in the Cadet Corps and in Sarmatian Poland.

Michcik takes from Piotr his view of the world via osmosis. He is the person of whom Piotr wrote in his memoirs, speaking to God: "Thou has called the peasant from the ranks who first fled in panic, to come face to face with an approaching death. Thou has put in his chest superhuman bravery, and used his hands to carry me from the ground" (I:188). Michcik's act of chivalry is here acknowledged by its beneficiary, and it becomes no less obvious than his belief in personal liberty. Thus Michcik the peasant becomes Michcik the knight. As René Girard has noted, violence, death, and sacrifice are integral aspects of the process of ennoblement.²⁰ Michcik is a prime example. At the battlefield a cowardly

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19 J. Kochanowski, *A Treatise on Virtue and Friendship*, translated by C. Spak. *Sarmatian Review*, vol. 13:3 (<http://www.ruf.rice.edu/~sarmatia/993/kochan.html>).

20 R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, Baltimore and London 1977.

peasant turned into a spiritual aristocrat, a feudal slave became a free man not because someone formally set him free, but because he willingly undertook the effort to oppose enslavement and fight for freedom. He did not step back from a situation of mortal danger and was able to rise above his own small and immediate interest.

Piotr wanted to formally set his villagers free, but he was not, strictly speaking, the owner of Wygnanka. After his death Michcik and other peasants from Wygnanka fall into the hands of one Mr. Chłuka, for whom “the holy love of the treasured homeland” meant little. As a man without family or assets, Michcik is dealt with according to Austrian law: he is ordered to return to serfdom and pay tribute to Mr. Chłuka. Michcik tries to escape but gets caught and is flogged. In contrast to the flogging imposed by Nardzewski on Zalesiak, this is a legal flogging, with all the authority of Austrian law behind it. The Enlightenment hypocrisy of Hibl is fully displayed in the flogging scene: the goal of the imperial bureaucracy was not to protect peasants from beatings, but rather to usurp for itself the exclusive right to administer floggings. “Respect me, dog, for I am a free man!” exclaims Michcik before pain prevents him from enunciating any comprehensible words (I:220).

The flogging scene and the proclamation of personal dignity are full of symbolism of freedom and bondage. Michcik participated in eight battles. For military courage and bravery the ancestors of aristocracy in Europe gained ennoblement, titles, and lands. Michcik understands that. He knows that the freedom Piotr granted him is a just reward for his deeds. For him flogging is a sign that the social order for which he has been fighting has been defeated, and those who administer his punishment do not represent his country but are invaders and enemies. Michcik’s tragedy lies in the fact that at the time when he becomes a free man, he is defeated and humiliated. Michcik, a peasant by birth, restores dignity and seriousness to noble freedom. He restores the dignity of knighthood, described so well by Marek Troszynski in his deliberations on Mickiewicz, Słowacki, Miłosz, and Herbert.²¹ Michcik considers himself to be a citizen, and citizens are not punished by flogging. His flogging is an allegory for Sarmatian Poland raped and humiliated by its colonizers. Michcik and Nardzewski rather

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²¹ This paper was read during the conference “Herbert na językach” held in Warsaw 10–12 December 2008, and was subsequently published in the Polish-language original and in English translation: M. Troszynski, *On the Shoulders of Giants*, “Sarmatian Review”, vol. 30, 1 (2010), pp. 1463–69 (<http://www.ruf.rice.edu/~sarmatia/110/301troszy.htm>).

than Olbromski and Cedro, are the most prominent symbols of those values that colonialism tried to destroy.

It should be noted that these two characters appear in the first volume and disappear in the second, to appear again in the third. In the meantime, Żeromski provides us with a narrative of wars and the participation in them of Rafał Olbromski and Krzysztof Cedro. This motive sometimes produces an excellent narrative, as in the description of Napoleon's victory at Saragossa (the irony here is that the conquest of Spain by Napoleon was an act of colonialism). But often the narrative is rather tedious because it abounds in dead mannerisms of fin de siècle artistry. This Spanish (and violent) part of the novel accounts for most of the negative criticism about *Ashes*.²² I propose rather to look at the initial and final sections of the novel, avoiding the lengthy interlude used by Żeromski to attract contemporary readers seeking "action" and violence.

After the flogging Michcik is drafted into the Austrian army. He deserts several times, for which he is again punished with beatings. He finally manages to escape and reach the Polish army. In the third volume we find him at Rafał's side. Then Michcik is again called "brother," this time by Cedro. The word "brother" thus becomes a symbolic confirmation of the transformation of this simple man from peasantry to the brotherhood of free citizens in Sarmatian Poland.²³

One of the standard novel techniques is the "accidental" meeting of characters. It is used by Tolstoy to arrange the meeting of Maria Bolkonskaya and Nikolai Rostov in *War and Peace*, a typical imperial novel. In imperial novels all ends well, so the marriage of Mary and Nikolai not only takes place, but also provides the two families with success and happiness. The situation is different in colonial and postcolonial novels in which the protagonists meet, but not to increase their own happiness or that of their families. At the end of the third volume of *Ashes*, Rafał's cavalry detachment is stationed near his uncle Nardzewski's estate, and Rafał takes the opportunity to visit his relative. Here the plot begins to develop in a manner typical of the colonial novel: the subaltern is punished for having

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²² Typical is the comment made by Czesław Miłosz about *Ashes*. Miłosz wrote of *Ashes* as if it contained only Napoleonic wars and Romantic characters. Cz. Miłosz, *The History of Polish Literature*, London: MacMillan 1969, pp. 367–368. Just like Miłosz, Artur Hutnikiewicz omits the colonial motif in the volume *Żeromski* (A. Hutnikiewicz, *Żeromski* Warsaw 1987).

²³ Żeromski brings two other peasants towards Sarmatism: Kacper the shooter, who fights with Nardzewski against the Austrian intruders and risks his life, and Gajkoś, Krzysztof Cedro's companion in Spain.

refused to comply with the colonialist's wishes. Since Nardzewski had not followed Hibl's instructions, representatives of the imperial government did what all colonial governments do in such cases: they subdued the wayward Pole by violence. An army detachment was sent to Nardzewski's estate to force him to submit. It is doubtful whether such a turn of the plot could have been introduced had a native Austrian nobleman been involved. In such a case the narrator would probably have described negotiations that allowed relatives of the disobedient citizen to smooth over the incident by paying the taxes that were due. But the territory of the conquered people can be destroyed and brutalized, and the novel's narrative reflects this. The Austrian army detachment arrives at Nardzewski's estate and demands that he open his granaries and barns, as if it were foreign territory. Nardzewski responds with fire, resulting in the burning of the mansion and farm and Nardzewski's death. After arriving in Wyrwy, Rafał finds his uncle's body chopped into small pieces—a sign not only of a fearless defence of home and property, but also of the attackers' sadism. It was not enough to kill Nardzewski, he also had to be humiliated.

Nardzewski acted somewhat like the hero of Zbigniew Herbert's "Mr. Cogito's Envoy." Knowing that he could not win against a squadron of Austrians, he entered the fight to defend what he considered his most valuable asset: his rights as a free man. With a typically Sarmatian lack of calculation, he decided to defend this freedom even though the fight was hopeless: "because this is how you will attain the good you will not attain. . . and they will reward you with what they have at hand / with the whip of laughter with murder on a garbage heap."²⁴ Nardzewski acts unwisely. Austrian commanders and many others would say he acted stupidly. Adherents of the rule "survive at all costs" would have assessed the situation differently. To save life and property, they would have opened granaries and given the army everything except the prudently concealed supplies necessary for personal survival. They would have apologized, would have begun reading official letters, and would have settled the unpaid taxes. From the standpoint of common sense this would have been the right thing to do.

Was it the narrator's intention to show that Nardzewski is stupid? Without the introduction of the idea of liberty by the author, we would have

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24 Z. Herbert, *Posłanie Pana Cogito*, in: Idem, *Pan Cogito* Wrocław 1997, p. 89. English translation by J. and B. Carpenter, *Envoy of Mr. Cogito*, in: *Mr. Cogito*, New York 1995, p. 61.

to answer “yes” to this question. But the narrator presents Nardzewski as a Sarmatian in an extreme situation. In this situation a “reasonable” action is an irresponsible luxury. The empire spoke to Nardzewski; the only choice a free man had was to answer the empire.²⁵ “Survival at all costs” was not an option. One could say that in this episode of the novel Żeromski’s narrator uses the heaviest artillery and does it with the deepest conviction. He acts this way because the values Nardzewski holds in high esteem manifest themselves only in extreme situations and are rewarded by “reasonable” people “with the whip of laughter with murder on a garbage heap.”

After Nardzewski’s death it becomes clear that he had not neglected matters that were important to him. Many years earlier he had written a will and deposited it with a lawyer. In this will he bequeathed his estate to his nephew Rafał Olbromski. At an accelerated pace, the narrator tells the story of how Rafał moved to Wyrwy, rebuilding it after the complete destruction caused by the Austrians. However, in contrast to *War and Peace* where in a similar turn of plot Pierre Bezukhov settles at a country estate and where Tolstoy’s narrator comes up with a triumphant sermon on history favoring Russia because of its greatness, the narrator of *Ashes* suggests that the tsunami of colonialism will continue to destroy and kill.

At the time he was writing *Ashes* Żeromski was also reading *War and Peace*. There are traces of influence of Tolstoy’s masterpiece on Żeromski’s novel, but the enumeration of these similarities is a task for students practising the art of essay writing. I am more interested in the limitations and restrictions faced by a writer belonging to a colonized nation as opposed to a writer from an imperial nation. In his commentary on *Ashes*, Aleksander Achmatowicz emphasizes that because of the potentially greatest number of readers in the Russian partition, Żeromski wanted to publish his novel in Warsaw rather than Kraków and therefore had to take tsarist censorship into account.²⁶ Additionally, the early version of the novel was confiscated by the tsarist police and has never been found. Tolstoy knew no such restrictions. His novel provided an important element in the construction of the myth of Russianness and its special meaning. Tolstoy’s laudation of Emperor Alexander I before the battle of Austerlitz remains in the imagination of the Russians forever, insensitive to political changes and

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25 “The empire writes back” became a standard statement of postcolonial criticism, since the publication of Bill Ashford’s book of that title (London 2002, second edition).

26 A. Achmatowicz, “Afterword,” in Żeromski, *Ashes*, vol. 3, p. 350.

historical criticism. The numerous positive and optimistic interpretations shaded Russian war failures away from the novel's readers and helped build internal and external prestige (and prestige, as Nancy Fraser argues, has become a major international currency in modern times²⁷), the prestige that remains Russia's trump card to this day.

Let us now consider the fragment of the second volume of *Ashes* where the narrator describes Cedro's and Olbromski's arrival in Kraków. The young men want to sneak across the Prussian-Austrian border to enlist in Napoleon's army. In Kraków they witness preparations for the execution of three Poles who tried to do the same and were captured by Austrians. History preserved the names of two convicts: Baum and Wysiekierski. Due to their parents' connections, these two were pardoned at the last minute. The third convict, whose name remains unknown, was hanged. This episode in the novel is based on real events. Even after the execution the Austrians did not disclose the name of the hanged man to Poles.²⁸

Let us look again at the narrative reporting the execution. The narrator tells the reader that the hanging took place in the presence of crowds, and emphasizes the fact that people were told to come to the show. Why? Because such a spectacle (confirmed, I repeat, by historians), attended by thousands of spectators—inhabitants of colonized Galicia—suggests certain consequences. The well-known psychological argument in favor of the death penalty is its effect on potential criminals. In this case, the “potential criminals” were Poles who might want to rebel against Austrian colonialism. Their compulsory presence at the execution was intended to persuade them against undertaking such action. Żeromski's narrator concurs; he suggests that the crowd's inevitable reaction will be fear and moving away from the convicts. He proposes that the frightened people will compete against each other in currying favor with the Authority, thus dividing society from within. The crowd will understand the madness of opposing Authority; it will comply with its orders and keep quiet, will “live just to survive, to wriggle out cheaply”²⁹ instead of taking the risk of fighting for a nonexistent Polish state.

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27 N. Fraser, *Rethinking Recognition*, "New Left Review", 3 (2000).

28 A. Achmatowicz, "Afterword," in Żeromski, *Ashes*, vol. 2, p. 370.

29 Stefan Wyszyński, inaugural speech celebrating the new academic year at the Catholic University of Lublin, given 1 October 1975.

Of course, some actual viewers of the execution could respond differently. They could identify with the convicts and be strengthened in their belief that the Habsburgs were their sworn enemies, but such a reaction could have been expected from a small minority. The majority were likely to absorb the suggestion that rebellion was unthinkable. Here we find the breeding ground for all the Jarzyskis whom the narrator uses to “decorate” the novel’s pages and whose counterparts among the Polish population under foreign occupation were probably even more numerous than in *Ashes*. To paraphrase Lord Acton’s saying, power corrupts, and colonial power corrupts absolutely.

Here again the novel imitates social life. In the nineteenth century, in all the colonial territories the colonialists tried to convince the subalterns that armed struggle did not pay while civic cowardice, cynicism, and selfishness did. Such beliefs were to be assimilated by the colonized, and they were. Zbigniew Herbert’s “Mr. Cogito’s Envoy” is directed at the few—the lion’s share of any society generally follows suggestions coming from the Authority. Like any colonial power, imperial officials wanted to generate a sense of marginality, helplessness, uncertainty, and political impotence in Poles; they largely succeeded. In a situation where the overwhelming majority of the population is terrorized by memory of executions of the rebellious, even the most enthusiastic minority begins to hesitate and shrink. Thus the colonial authorities were engaged in destroying the social fabric from within by promoting short-sighted opportunistic attitudes. This is exactly what caused the anger of the first anticolonialists, such as Frantz Fanon and Stefan Żeromski. This is the background to introducing the execution plot to the novel.

The narrator of *Ashes* unambiguously states that civic generosity results in suffering, exclusion, death, and personal disaster. From the standpoint of civic education, developments in the city of Kraków occupied by the Habsburgs (both in the novel and in history) taught cynicism and cowardice to Poles. Reading Żeromski’s novel from a postcolonial point of view suggests that the policy of the Viennese metropolis was similar to the policies of other metropolises in relation to colonized nations. Poles were to acquire the characteristics of colonized people: they were to start viewing themselves and their fellow Poles as weaker, worse, unable to govern themselves, destined for someone’s else’s sovereignty, and fundamentally excluded from the competition for excellence that continuously goes on in the world on an individual level and on the level of nations.

Thus the message of *Ashes* is as follows: a colonized society inevitably withers away, it becomes cowardly, second-rate, negligible. This is not the kind of lesson taught to young people in imperial countries. They hear an entirely different message, and their literature reflects this. The Russians hear, through *War and Peace*, that generosity towards one's own nation is rewarded, respected, and profitable to the individual, family and the state. Tolstoy's triumphant narrative flattered Russians and taught them self-confidence, while Żeromski's narrative, though motivating exceptional individuals to exceptional effort, certainly did not help the development of the Polish community. Colonial pessimism hangs over *Ashes*, while a halo of victorious optimism surrounds *War and Peace*. *Ashes* shows how a colonial taxonomy replaces the native one: instead of saying "this is Polish land", the new power teaches peasants and nobility to say "this is imperial land." *War and Peace* teaches readers that in the nineteenth century there were no nations between Russia and Germany, only some provinces with an ethnic profile, something like Schleswig-Holstein in Germany today; *Ashes* suggests that while such nations existed, they experienced a devastating defeat. While in Żeromski's book Poles lose their estates, in Tolstoy's Russian gain them: Pierre Bezukhov inherits large properties in Ukraine that had been violently taken away from the Catholic Church and from the Polish and Ruthenian aristocracy by Empress Catherine, then given to Catherine's Russian favorites, including Pierre Bezukhov's father. In the last part of *Ashes* even Duke Gintułt becomes impoverished, while in *War and Peace* Russian families, even if they grew poorer as a result of Napoleon's invasion (the Rostov family), regain their social status and wealth through a good marriage (Nikolai Rostov, Natasha Rostov). Pierre Bezukhov gets rich as a result of the partitions of Poland while Nardzewski, the Olbromski family, and Duke Gintułt become poor by working for their country and fighting for its independence. While Tolstoy constructs a mythology of an idyllic Russian family by means of a narrative about the Rostovs, Żeromski's narrative describes the breakdown of the Polish family with political disasters in the background. In *Ashes* no one ends up wealthy, no one gets married in a happy and optimistic atmosphere. In contrast, at the beginning of *War and Peace* Bezukhov is a penniless loafer with no close relatives, but he ends his life as a respected and wealthy husband and father. Tolstoy created a mythology of the Russian nation, its greatness and perseverance, its happy present and future, and in doing so he availed himself of Russia's political and military successes. Żeromski's book is permeated with a tone

familiar from Cyprian Norwid's *Songs of Our Land*: Poland is "the vintage of tears / and black blood." This mythology did not serve the Polish cause, but it was the only mythology possible in the days of colonialism. Like almost all colonial and postcolonial novels, *Ashes* is a pessimistic novel; like most imperial novels, *War and Peace* brims with optimism. *Ashes* shows where and how Poland "fell out" of the process of European development, while *War and Peace* demonstrates Russia's triumphant entry into the club of European powers.

Thus *Ashes* is a novel about the destructive power of colonialism. It can be compared to an angry book by Frantz Fanon entitled *Les condamnés de la terre* [1961]. But Fanon is only enraged, while *Ashes* presents some alternatives. It is in fact a novel about two types of state-building mentality, the first represented by discipline and obedience to the ruler, and the second based on a desire for liberty as the precondition for human fulfilment and construction of a meaningful political entity. The novel's plot replays these two options over and over again.

It is true that Żeromski's narrator is not entirely successful in sketching out a proposition for liberty and its opposite, humble submission to authority. The novel's artistic status is diminished by the author's inability to fully flesh out the "positive" option represented by Nardzewski, Michcik, and Olbromski. Żeromski was also thwarted by colonial censorship (Tsarist and Austrian), unable to speak openly about the predatory processes of colonization, both in the Habsburg and Romanov Empires. It is rather obvious that he could not have presented Napoleon's march on Moscow from the point of view of Polish interests if the novel were to be published in Russian-occupied Warsaw, so he ended *Ashes* with preparations for the Napoleonic campaign. But the novel ends with the same message that we find in Herbert two generations later: "go upright among those who are on their knees / among those with their backs turned / and those toppled in the dust / you were saved not in order to live / you have little time you must give testimony." The reader who sympathizes with this message will evaluate the novel differently from one sympathetic to the program advanced by the Austrian authorities by means of imposing a death penalty on defiant Polish patriots.

This theme of liberty so persistently recurring in Polish literature should not be erroneously interpreted as a Romantic leftover. It has little in common with Romanticism; it originated in the Republican period of Polish history. The opposite option is that of Hibl and colonizing Austria

that wins by assuring, again in the words of Herbert, that everyone will get their “hole in the cheese . . . fat, quiet and warm,” where they will be able to hide, grill their hamburgers in peace, and lead a pleasant and easy life. The key suggestion that runs throughout the novel is that Austrian colonialism was ultimately a less attractive option than Polish aspirations to liberty. The Habsburg state was not only more powerful, but also better organized than the then-nonexistent Polish Republic. Even so, it pushed Polish Galicia back to a lower stage of cultural development. The refusal to select this option of “gliding down” and searching for liberty is characteristic not only of *Ashes*, but also of a large part of Polish literature up to the time of enslavement by the Soviets.

Translated by Katarzyna Tuwim

SUMMARY

Ashes (1904) is usually interpreted as a historical novel about the Napoleonic wars, but it is also a narrative about the destructiveness of colonialism in Polish territory. This paper argues that the adventures of two of Napoleon’s soldiers, Krzysztof Cedro and Rafał Olbromski, constitute a bait concealing two dramatically different propositions about the organization of society: one represented by the aged landowner Nardzewski and the peasant soldier Michcik, and the other by the Austrian government official Hibl. The first proposition places liberty and the individual at the centre of social values, whereas the other opts for compulsion for the sake of power and order. The colonial intervention destroyed Polish republican liberty and replaced it with authoritarianism, thus prodding Poles to choose inferior social solutions rather than the task of perfecting the republican system their ancestors articulated and tried to put into practice.