

## **The End of the World of Peasants. Images of Cultural Disintegration in Julian Kawalec's "Dancing Hawk"**

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In this paper the notion of the end of the world is understood in a metaphorical way so as to refer to a phenomenon we can name cultural disintegration. XXth century in Poland, and in Europe in general, is an epoch of decline and fall of traditional village culture. The phenomena of this kind had been often referred to or described by Polish writers representing literary genre labelled as "peasants novel". One of the most prominent example of this genre is a novel by Julian Kawalec entitled "Dancing hawk" (1964). The aim of this paper is to analyse and interpret some images from the novel, their way of representation of the culture of the village. I will try characterise the narration of the novel and the point of view of the narrator.

"Thoughts about the end of the world are usually haunting people who witness the collapse of their own culture, which until recently was the absolute for them. In traditional folk culture what is ours does not require justification, it is self-evident, right, natural, true" (Pawluczuk, 1974: 11)

Technological, social, and political changes after the II world war undermined a cultural values from before the war. A book by Włodzimierz Pawluczuk served as an inspiration for the title of this paper. Pawluczuk, a cultural anthropologist from eastern Poland, published a monograph describing and analysing the birth of a new religious current in Wierszalin, one of the villages near Białystok, in Poland, before the II world war. Some people declared themselves as the prophets, entered in the church during the service and preached a new revelation. Many other people followed them, what ended in the construction of a new church. The prophet finally escaped and disappeared when his confessors arrived to his home with a huge, wooden cross and the intention of crucifying him to make the prophecy fulfil.

Pawluczuk characterises traditional territorial community (tradycyjna społeczność wiejska), as he calls it, in few points. First of the set of the features is the type of social relation, whose "basic component is a direct, everyday, constant mental contact face to face" (Pawluczuk, 1972: 15).

The second feature is monoculturality.

"All the members of traditional territorial community belongs to the same culture in every meaning of this term: they speak the same language, benefit from the cultural resources

of the same tradition, they profess the same world view, they worship the same holiness and respect the same authority” (Pawluczuk, 1972: 17).

Another specificity of traditional village culture according to Pawluczuk consists in the mutual harmony between particular cultural products, what results in its resistance against innovations coming from outside. This trait is related to multifunctionality of cultural creations. It means that in traditional territorial culture there is no clear boundary between practical, utilitarian, everyday activities and the sphere of magic and religion. Every single act has its sacral and magical dimension (Pawluczuk, 1972: 18-20).

During XXth century in Poland the village was undertaking evolution that lead to gradual loss of all aforementioned features, what finally brought about the fall of traditional territory culture in this region.

### **Peasant current in literature**

Therefore it is nothing surprising that the collapse of traditional village culture become one of the most pertinent topics of peasants novel. It is also one of the favourite Kawalec’s motives, appearing in several work by him. One of them is “Dancing Hawk”, a novel telling a story of the life and death of Michał Toporny, a peasant who got engineering education in his thirties and became a president of a large industry later on. The story is set in dynamically developing communist state of Poland after the end of the second world war. A rapid social advancement did not take place without incurring certain costs. The life of Toporny was finished by suicide. Fairly parallelly to the life of Toporny, his village has changed and even though the evolution lead to improvement of the life of peasants, few victims of the process lost their life in the meantime. Are we authorised to use a term of social disorganisation to refer to this kind of events? According to social scientists, pioneers of research on sociology of peasants, William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, social disorganisation stands for

“a decrease of the influence of existing social rules of behaviour upon individual members of the group. This decrease may present innumerable degrees, ranging from a single break of some particular rule by one individual up to a general decay of all the institutions of the group” (Thomas, Znaniecki, 1920: 2).

Does Toporny break some rules of his community? The rule who broke was abandoning his farm and land. A tool for this transgression was literacy. Toporny acquired diploma of engineer. As a result the life of a peasant, even quite rich in land after social revolution, became not enough for him.

Thomas and Znaniecki distinguish between social disorganisation and individual disorganisation, which, as they show, can function completely independently. In the case of “Dancing Hawk” at the foreground the process of an individual disorganisation is presented, whereas simultaneous increase of social

disorganisation provides the background for the narrative and its parallel.

As I already mentioned, the images of social disorganisation and cultural destruction are one of the favourite topics of postwar peasants novel in Poland. The term “peasants current in literature” has been proposed by Henryk Bereza, one of the most prominent literary critics in the second half of the XXth century in Poland. Bereza point out a specificity of rural culture in Poland:

“Polish peasants culture remained on the rights of reserve of a culture-creating forces in its almost primordial state. It survived until the XXth century in the form like nowhere else in the world” (Bereza, 1972: 9)

It by no means doesn't imply that in other national literatures one cannot remark the influence of peasants culture. On the contrary. As far as the Scandinavia is concerned, Bereza utters, the peasants origins predominate among the writers. Meanwhile in Poland, the voice of peasants has almost not been audible before the XX century, even though the topic of the village was present in the literature. Practically till the second world war Polish village was suffering under the burden of serfdom and socage. Village community was also mostly deprived of access to higher education. Therefore not too many writers have been originated from peasants social group. Only XX century seems to be period of flourishing of peasants literature. Its form preferred was a novel.

Bereza indicates some precursors of peasants novel, such as Władysław Kowalski (1894-1958) and Jan Wiktor (1890-1967), both not only authors of many novels and short stories, but also politicians and MPs. Subsequently Bereza proposes to distinguish two or even three generations of the peasants current (*nurt chłopski*) in the Polish literature. The first generation was born around 1900-1920 and debuted in the 30. and the 40., just before the outbreak of II world war and during it: Stanisław Piętak, Henryk Worcell, Józef Morton, Jan Bolesław Ożóg, Julian Kawalec (1916-2014), Stanisław Czernik, Jalu Kurek, Wincenty Burek, Józef Ozga-Michalski, Antoni Olcha, Władysław Machejek, Stanisław Skoneczny, Władysław Dunarowski, Jan Maria Gisges, Zofia Drózdź-Satanowska, Julian Gałaj, Józef Pogan Józef Kapeniak and others (Bereza, 1972: 11). They rarely had university degrees and was characterized by a complex submission to the reigning literary culture (Bereza, 1972: 13-14).

The second generation was mostly well educated and had no complexes, Their representatives were born in 1920-1940 and entered the literary saloons in the 50. and the 60s. Tadeusz Nowak, Edward Stachura, Marian Pilot, Urszula Kozioł, Ernest Bryll, Wiesław Myśliwski, Henryk Jachimowski, Bogusław Kogu, Zygmunt Trziszka, Czesław Kuriata, Zbigniew Ryndak, Adolf Momot, Zygmunt Wójcik etc. belong here among many others.

As for the third generation Bereza enumerates only Edward Redliński (born 1940) and Jerzy Waksmański (born 1943). According to Bereza the distinctive

feature of the third generation is “sensitivity to the ridiculousness of what ridiculousness is not usually suspected of” (Bereza, 1972: 17).

This statement arouses associations with the theory of carnival laughter by Mikhail Bakhtin. The latter describes carnival laughter as:

“universal in scope: it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival’s participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. (...) this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival (...) it is also directed at those who laugh” (Bakhtin, 1984: 12-13).

This intertext shouldn’t be perceived as arbitrary and ignoring chronology. Carnival laughter originates from folk culture, whose roots are in a big part peasant, what the figure of Marcolf proves.

This, among other reasons, makes me to be tempted to use this term of peasants literature in a broader sense than those of Bereza, limited only to XXth century. What could be peasant literature in general? Is it actually possible at all that peasant literature exist? The traditional peasant culture is oral, therefore deprived of the possibility of preserving knowledge in a writing form. Whereas the very notion of literature includes a condition of being written. Pio Zirimu, an Ugandan linguist, proposed a term ‘orature’, to design oral fictional narratives and to skip oxymoronic name of oral literature (Thiong’o, 2007: 4). As Walter Jackson Ong utters, writing restructures consciousness, therefore a peasant who acquired a capability of writing doesn’t fully preserve his/her cultural identity (Ong, 2012: 77-114). A literate peasant is not a peasant any more.

Nevertheless, we can follow the topic of villager in the literary works from ancient times, therefore we can strive to extend the scope of the term of peasants literature and reject for a moment chronological limit. Reviewing the literary works whose peasants are main characters, we will concentrate at the point of view of the storyteller. One of the first literary works in the history of Polish literature referencing to the topic of peasants and village is “A Satire on Lazy Peasants” from the XVth century. As the reader can easily perceive even from the title, the narrator of this anonymous poem is definitely not a representative of peasants’ perspective. Quite the contrary, he describes them from a paternalistic perspective, based on appropriately structured set of assumptions. The narrator of the satire complains that peasants take rest during their work and warns that they can be more intelligent than they seem at first sight.

Similarly, one of the masterpieces of Polish literature, “The Peasants” by Władysław Reymont, appraised by its realism and authenticity, doesn’t represent a peasants’ voice neither. It proposes a view on the village from above, seeking sensational elements and aiming at exoticization of the topic of life in the village. This strategy seems to be quite similar to orientalisation described by Edward



Said (1976). Preserving some elements of traditional village culture, the fictional world of “The Peasants”, a novel honoured with a Nobel Prize in 1924, portrays the community of peasants in a biased way. All the black characters are villagers, whereas the nobility is presented in a idealised manner. Besides, the sensational and erotic elements are emphasized, what puts into big doubt alleged realism or let alone naturalism of the novel (conf. Wyka, 2000: 88).

### **The life and death of dancing hawk**

The main character of the novel, Michał Toporny, is a peasant living in a village somewhere in Poland. During the second world war he went to village school, but cannot afford further education. However, a village teacher gave him private lessons and Toporny is admitted to the university of technology. This fact and subsequent fast career in industry was eased by his peasant origins and his political engagement. The communist government in Poland in the 50. of XX century pursued an emancipation policy and made easier to the poorest to get to the university. The complications in his private life in the meantime leads to the final tragic death, most probably a suicide.

Critics interpret “Dancing hawk” by Julian Kawalec as the novel about the costs of social advance (Marzec, 1983: 51). The life of Toporny consists of two, incoherent parts. “The life of Michał Toporny spanned for fifty years and it can be said that it was half rural and half urban” (Kawalec, 1964: 7).

When he started his university studies in his thirties, he had already a wife and a son in his home in the village. Nonetheless, he decides to abandon them for a woman he met in the city. He has then a “new” wife and son afterwards, the “city” ones. Psychological probability of the narrative is weakened in favour of clear game of ethical elements framed into the structure of moral play. The character of traditional, medieval moral play is only an exemplification of a general fate and a personification of a character trait (Abramowska, 2002: 559). The motive of inevitable destiny is present too, since the story is opened with a scene of a funeral of Toporny, fifty years old “CEO of the large mining union” (Kawalec, 1964: 10). Thus, other critics interpret the novel in more general way and see in it a narrative describing universal upstart’s psyche (*psychika dorobkiewicza*). According to this interpretative direction the critical dimension of the novel would fit equally well to the times of communism, as to the current epoch of capitalism:

“I am not surprised that nobody has re-published this book since 1989. Too painful and for up-to-date reading!” (Kajtoch, 2001: 47)

The narration of the novel hits with its originality as far as the style is concerned. In the first part of the novel, when Toporny lives in the village the narrator tells the story in 3<sup>rd</sup> person, whereas in the second and third part the narrative

turns into surprising, unusual 2<sup>nd</sup> person, epic “You” (Marzec, 1983: 53). One can suppose that the narrator of “Dancing hawk” is an omniscient one: s/he seems to know every thought and deed of every character and her/his life. However, critics remarks some limit of narrator’s knowledge, for instance, when s/he poses questions s/he doesn’t know the answers in the final of the novel (Kunda, 1984: 106). Bereza indicates Faulknerian inspirations, stressing in the same time Kawalec’s narrative innovations, leading towards supposed disappearance of the narrator in “Dancing hawk” (Bereza, 1972: 117, 124). Later on I will try to contribute to the portrait of the narrator of “Dancing Hawk” with few additional features.

In the following analysis I will try to apply perspective somehow similar of post-colonial criticism. I will intend to point out evidences for hegemonic perspective the narrator. What is interesting, the critics are mostly identifying themselves with this perspective and consider it as their own. Homi Bhabha’s notion of mimicry may provide some inspiration in the analysis of this phenomenon as well as the narrative about Toporny:

“colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” (Bhabha, 1994: 86).

Michał Toporny, a peasant that become a CEO, is a good example of “a reformed, recognizable Other”. He is a subject of constant “slippage, excess, difference”. One of the main features of the the narrator voice is justification of all these “slippage, excess, difference”, without any intention to look from inside the subject consciousness to realize that no form of life needs any justification. Still, the teller of the story seems to adopt paternalistic, colonial attitude towards his characters. There are two main premises to support a thesis about externality of the narrator voice. On the one hand it is the paternalistic way of representing peasant culture as “delayed”, on the other hand it is positioning peasantry against urbanity and townspeople rather than the nobility.

1) The first premise of hegemonic discourse of “Dancing hawk” is a repeated several times in the text of the novel utterance about apparent lack of the accumulation of the knowledge in the traditional village culture and the paucity of heritage received from the previous generations. This is how the narrator is addressing the main hero of the story, Michał Toporny:

“Your ancestor did not help you, because they only did so much that they gave you life and taught you love for small things and that was already a lot for them” (Kawalec, 1964: 190).

The culture of village is presented as scarcely existing, as almost nothing that can be transferred to the coming generations. This perspective is external,

looking on the peasant culture from the outer point of view and evaluating it according to the external criteria. This kind of description limits the whole cultural village heritage to “the love for small things” (Kawalec, 1964: 190).

Another example of apostrophe, which in a huge number contribute to the monumental style of the novel: “Because you are from those unfortunate late, catching up, still catching up, who sometimes have to hate the close ones in order to love strangers” (Kawalec, 2019: 123).

The biblical tone seems to affect the content of the quoted sentence. The life of peasants is described as handicapped from its essence. The peasant culture is stated being late in exactly the same way as the main character of the novel, Toporny, was late in his educational career. This is rather biased and paternalistic view formed obviously ignoring internal values and content of the village culture.

2) The second premise of the discourse of the novel, stressing an antagonism between peasantry and urbanity rather than between peasantry and the nobility, can be best illustrated by the way the social revolution in the village is reported by the narrator.

When the group of peasants enters the master’s palace, the building is already deserted. They walk intimidated in silence through the big spaces of destroyed interiors of the noble palace, until they perceive a bamboo stick the master used to keep in his hand and threaten the villagers.

“It was enough to remember the dry aroma of a bamboo thin stick, which the master in his good times struck with satisfaction and boredom on the shoe’s upper, and which he sometimes put under someone’s nose and said: “Smell!””(Kawalec, 1964: 49).

The cane symbolizes for the peasants humiliation and pain caused by the oppression by the master, his family, and the whole aristocracy by the figure of the methonymy. This is though not a sheer symbol. The power of corporal punishment belonged to the traditional privileges of village nobility over peasants.

“This small object, this cane finished with a leather loop, still guided the thoughts and imagination of those people who entered the master’s palace” (Kawalec, 1964: 51).

The narrator however stresses dependence of the minds of peasants’ on the patterns provided by behaviour of aristocrats. The peasants themselves are rather inert and deprived of their own initiative. As we will see, peasants are not capable of use physical violence against their ex-master. What does not mean that they are pacifists. Just after finding the cane they met a living entity — a little dog. It is symbolical that few pages before the master is compared to a dog by usage a metaphorical label of him as a “poor dog” (“pies nieborak”, Kawalec, 1964: 47). This little dog belonging to the wife of the master and abandoned by her exactly in the same way as the master, her husband, becomes first mortal victim

of the social revolution. Peasants kill the little dog ("he pressed his head with his shoe and the dog scratched his feet several times and died", Kawalec, 1964: 49), what leads to symbolical victimization of the aristocracy. The revolution is then devoided of heroic dimension and take the form of an assault of a stronger against a weaker. Killing of little pets belonging to a dominant social group has been already in the history of European culture an element of social revolution or at least a substitute of it, as the research of Robert Darnton on great cat massacre in Paris in XVIII century demonstrated (Darnton, 2009: 75-106).

The little dog is the first victim of peasants' aggression, or "cruelty" (Kawalec, 1964: 49), as the narrator puts it, incited by the view of the cane stick. The master became a victim too. He, until then managing the whole farm and profiting from peasants work, loses not only his belongings such as home and farm, but also his wife. Moreover, it is his wife who abandons him.

"they were told about this poor dog, that he was abandoned by his wife when she was fleeing the front" (Kawalec, 1964: 47)

The master is portrayed then as an inert, passive person, unable to take care about himself, very much alike in this aspect to the peasants. Nonetheless, all the peasants are able to do is to humiliate him in quite innocent way: by forcing him to kissing the feet of the poorest from the village. Afterwards the master is given a lift by one of the peasants to the train station, whereas the poorest villager went crazy some time later — as a result of the shock after obtaining his own piece of land. From the clash of the master and the peasant, the master leaves intact, whereas the peasant loses his mind. All the relations of power, subordination, and dependence are preserved according to traditional structure of social relations between the master and the slave.

These are the townspeople who are presented as the actual antagonist of the peasants. This fact has a taste of a paradox, since workers are mostly of peasant origins. This social conflict is illustrated by the murder of a worker by a villager. The operator of the bulldozer falls a death victim of the struggle between peasants and worker. He is killed by the peasant who doesn't want to let the forest to be cut down:

"at the moment the motorbike started the big peasant hit with the axe the head of a man sitting on the bulldozer's saddle and killed him" (Kawalec, 1964: 154)

The tragical irony wants that it is the main character of the novel, Toporny, an ex-peasant, who is responsible for the decision causing the conflict. A picture of social antagonism between peasants and workers is purported to cover an untold story about the antagonism between peasants (chłopi) and szlachta (nobility) in Poland, the latter exploiting the former for ages in the form of pańszczyzna (serfdom). Peasants who didn't own any land were supposed to pay their rent in



labour days. The nobility exercised full judicial power over peasants who became their practical slaves, since no peasant was able to leave her/his family village. The serfdom was abolished by the Emancipation reform of 1861 in Russia, which Poland was a part at the moment. Nevertheless, even after the reform 2/3 of peasant population was still deprived of their own land, so they had no other choice than to work for a local szlachta representative (pan) as his actual slaves. This state of affairs continued without major changes until World War II, what makes Polish situation in this respect unique in Europe.

In the work of reorientation of actual conflict from the axis peasants-nobility towards the axis peasants – townspeople the writer is supported by the critics. One of them is aiming into a biographical explanations of ideological determinants of Kawalec prose:

“The wealthy manor house and closely located beautiful Sandomierz triggered the sense of peasant harm and longing for a better life, they were, as the writer recalls, an inaccessible world of luxury, deeply contrasting with the village” (Wilkoń, 1981: 6)

According to Wilkoń the sense of peasant harm was not due to economic exploitation, psychical and physical aggression towards them, but solely because of huge differences in incomes and inglorious feelings of envy. Nor the critic, no the writer with actual peasants origins is able to adopt the point of view from within rural culture.

The access of the main character of the novel, Michał Toporny, to privileged, higher class, originating from former nobility, is told in a form of a folk-tale of a metamorphosis into a bird. “Michał, that strong, tall peasant with a dark, hawkish, greedy face” (Kawalec, 1964: 19).

Michał reveals “hawkish” qualities even before he transforms from a peasant into a townsman. His predator type face is portrayed as “greedy” (zachłanny). One of deadly sins marks him as original sin and may be the suggestion of the motivation staying behind Michał’s schools education and subsequent career. It is as if a peasant’s ambitions must have resulted only from negative character traits.

The proper rite of transformation took place in front of the mirror in the hall of the elegant restaurant. He and his reflection become two parts of his life, his previous peasant life and his current life of the president of the company. Also, it is an interesting analogy to Lacan’s mirror stage, when the subject constitutes itself for the first time as an autonomous entity.

“Born in the room where there was compacted and leveled clay instead of the floor, he made some careless slips on the glossy marble, then approached a large mirror, leaning slightly forward, then stepped back a few steps and looked himself from head to foot; because suddenly he had an opportunity — maybe even the first time in his life — that he could wholly see himself beginning from the soles of his shoes and finishing on his hair” (Kawalec, 1964: 96).

After this spontaneous ceremony in front of the mirror, Michał “gives an order” (Kawalec, 1964: 97) to his “village” wife, Maria, to burn his old, peasant cloths — his old skin. It is not needed any more, he has a new skin now, he is full fledged hawk now. This new skin, however, won’t last too long time. After few years of prosperity, Toporny, the new skin falls off: What Toporny remarks at first is just “tired eyes”, wrinkles, and “slightly visible sagging nose” (Kawalec, 1964: 197). But then suddenly

“this new skin, donned in front of a large mirror in the hall of the nightclub a dozen years ago, began to fall off; this new skin, which as a symbol defined all his life attitude formed during the first months and years of his stay in the city, his ruthlessness on the march “up” and his greedy catching up on backwardness, and his egoism covering misfortune and trembling of a belated who holds in his trembling hands the gifts of the time.” (Kawalec, 1964: 197)

Toporny is portrayed here as a tragical hero, a victim of historical circumstances and conditions. If anyone is to be blamed here, this is Toporny himself, as greedy, ruthless, egoistic. This way of representing a peasant character seems to confirm the worst, pejorative stereotypes concerning peasants, very much in the vein of “A Satire on Lazy Peasants”, or “Peasants” by Reymont.

The peasant origins is something the director Toporny is ashamed to confess.

“You are introducing to this girl your peasantry and you are accusing yourself with your peasantry, and then you are humbly staring at this woman’s face and expect humbly judgment” (Kawalec, 1964, 140).

He is discouraged by his new, bourgeois, urban family, to disclosing his roots. They suggest to him to pretend to spend his youth on horse riding. Whereas Toporny remembers the truth:

“I was an ordinary peasant and I didn’t spend my youth riding a horse. When it was necessary, I buried dead pigs, killed a dying mare, I was a peasant sowing from a sheet and mowing a scythe, cutting branches of willows, I was a pig and cow veterinarian, a murderer of unnecessary dogs, a simpleton leaning on the fence and looking at the fields.” (Kawalec, 1964, 140)

All the activities related with peasants work are presented in an unfavourable light and in a contemptuous way. Toporny confesses his peasantry and waits for the judgement. It is as to be born as a peasant would be an offence. The narrator seems to share his contempt to the condition of a peasant, instantiating hegemonic perspective towards peasant subalterns.

On the basis of the perverse law of mimicry aristocracy lasts an eternal object of aspiration. The way a young engineer of aristocratic origins is described discloses main features of social distinction as it is perceived by the narrator:

“with elegant behaviour and knowledge of theatre (...) he had access to his father’s library dealing with humanities, and in particular with French literature” (Kawalec, 1964: 176).

This kind of construction of social distinction is based on aesthetic preferences, what resembles research of Pierre Bourdieu on this topic (1979). The narrator characterizes the young aristocrat as

“a man in whom survived the gains accumulated for him for many generations without his effort and pain” (Kawalec, 1964: 185).

This statement presents the village culture as lacking accumulation and deprived of its own cultural values.

As Walter Jackson Ong utters, writing reconstructs the consciousness. Thus, a peasant accessin to the scriptural culture of city undergone such a process, becomes a part of urban culture and represents its interests in his/her scriptural discourse. The novel written by a peasant is not 100% peasants novel. Nevertheless, manifesting the hybridity of the narrator, the novel itself becomes a historical testimony of social change.

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