

Paweł Bohuszewicz

Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń

bohusz@umk.pl

ORCID: 0000-0003-0033-2876

On the Margins of Category. Liberty as Cooperation in a Non-Prototypical Neo-Sarmatian Novel*

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ABSTRACT: The article contains an analysis of the book series *Diabtu ogarek* [*Candle-End for the Devil*] by Konrad T. Lewandowski. Its main goal is to show that the basic variety of Neo-Sarmatism, that is, right-wing Neo-Sarmatism, is not the only one, as there is a certain hidden potentiality in Sarmatism, realized by the novels under discussion. Against right-wing Neo-Sarmatism – resentimental (towards the broadly understood modernity), exclusive (towards subordinated groups, not included in Neo-Sarmatism) and patriarchal (“lordly”) – Lewandowski situates a world that can be termed as democratic in the broadest sense of the notion of democracy as extended to earthly and non-earthly beings, human and non-human ones, as well as regulating relations within the human world.

KEYWORDS: Neo-Sarmatism, Konrad T. Lewandowski, resentment, lordliness, democracy

The latest history of Polish culture begins after 1989. That year saw the transformation which made it possible for Poland to transition from a communist system to a liberal capitalist democracy. The entrance of Polish culture into the orbit of influence of values produced by said democracy (universalism, individualism, secularism, consumerism...) met with resistance on the part of conservative communities, experiencing strong nostalgia for Polishness “in its traditional version, unmodified by the years of Communism” (Matyja 2009: 77).

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The interest of the present text consists in those conservatives for whom the basic reference point consists in political and cultural traditions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (the so-called First Polish Republic). It existed from 1569 (the Union of Lublin) until 1795, when the Third Partition of Poland took place, resulting in the disappearance of the Polish state from European maps. For the contemporary conservatives, the initial period of the First Polish Republic is the time of the greatest splendor of their country: one of enormous territory (of almost 1 million square kilometers), almost devoid of cities, for most of its existence (especially in the 16th and the first half of 17th century) economically powerful and politically well functioning. In 1795, as a result of a change in political situation, as well as an internal crisis, this powerful organism ceases to exist, becoming a natural fodder for cultural nostalgia, which, in fact, continues throughout the entire existence of modern Polish culture¹.

While positive references to noble culture (as constitutive for the First Polish Republic) were possible in the communist era (cf. Czaplinski 2011), they were definitely made difficult due to being contradictory to the official state ideology, which appreciated economically and culturally subordinate classes. Communist officials inscribed the culture of the First Polish Republic into the framework of Marxist theory, according to which past society could be divided into two classes: on the one hand, the nobility and the clergy, that is, the holders of the means of production and capital, and, on the other, peasantry and the townsfolk, or the exploited state (Walas 2003: 34). According to this social ontology and the valuation inscribed within it, when researching the underprivileged strata, one needed to do them justice, hence the strong presence of the plebeian strata in the literary and cultural studies of the Communist era².

The breakthrough came in 1989: due to the agreement between representatives of the opposition and the Communist government, the “round table” talks took place, followed by partly free elections to the Sejm and the Senate, in which the Solidarity opposition achieved a vast victory. The cultural reaction to these political changes was the beginning of the process of re-gaining heritage, as Teresa Walas (2003) referred to it. One of the elements of the past that the phenomenon called Neo-Sarmatism attempts to reconstitute in these new circumstances is the cultural heritage of Polish nobility. This restitution takes place in the circumstances of the new economic reality, leading to complications described by the notion of “external asynchrony”, used by Teresa Walas. It consists in “a discord between the general wish to recover the values sup-

1 The latest text to activate this nostalgia is Jacek Komuda's book *Upadek. Jak straciliśmy pierwszą Rzeczpospolitą* [*The Downfall. How We Lost the First Polish Republic*] (2025). On society, culture and politics of the Commonwealth since the emergence of the Polish-Lithuanian Union until its downfall, see Augustyniak 2015. On the downfall of the Commonwealth, see Topolski 2015.

2 An example can be found in the career of the so-called “Sowizdrzał literature”, which included texts written by plebeian underprivileged strata supposedly in an act of rebellion against the values preferred by the nobility. Cf. Grzeszczuk 1970, 1985; Ziomek 1954. For critical reflection regarding studies on Old Polish literature as inspired by Marxism, see Wojtowicz 2010.

posedly taken away by the Communism, and the opportunities provided by the free world, containing proposals sometimes considerably distant from those expectations” (Walas 2003: 147). This leads to the emergence of resentment, particularly visible in the brand of Neo-Sarmatism particular to the intelligentsia, that is, the 1990s publications in such journals as “Frona”, “Arcana”, “Debata”, among which the first place needs to be given to Krzysztof Koehler’s texts (e.g. Koehler 1994, 1995a, 1995b, 1996), but also in subsequent essayist books from the turn of the 20th and the 21st century, or from the 21st century, for example, those by Jacek Kowalski (2000, 2006, 2008, 2016) or Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, the author of *Samuel Zborowski* (2010) and *Reytan* (2013). Pop cultural in their essence, Neo-Sarmatian novels are also marked by particular anti-modern and anti-liberal resentment. In an earlier article on this subject I wrote:

Neo-Sarmatian novel is a form of fictional narrative prose whose presented world is an artistic representation of the 17th century Polish Commonwealth. This representation is modeled according to the basic assumption that the reality it refers to was structured according to [social – P. B.] states, out of which the most important and the only one worth of depicting was the noble state, which had created its own culture, contemporarily referred to as “Sarmatian” culture. Hence the decision to discuss Neo-Sarmatism, despite the awareness of all issues connected both to the factual nature of Sarmatism as such, and to the meanings inscribed into the “neo-” prefix (Bohuszewicz 2023: 104).

Among its representatives there are Jacek Komuda, Rafał Dębski, Maciej Liziniewicz, Konrad T. Lewandowski, Jacek Piekara – writers whose novels and short stories are published by the company Fabryka Słów. The previous statements require some follow-ups. To begin with, not all novels concerning 17th century nobility and referring to a Sarmatian worldview can be termed Neo-Sarmatian. For instance, we would not refer this way to Tomasz Jurasz’s novel *Karoca* [*The Carriage*] (2001) (its protagonists is a 17th century noblewoman, Anna Alojza, widow of the *hetman* Jan Karol Chodkiewicz, who escapes from endangered Ostróg with the court) or the novel cycle about Kacper Ryx by Mariusz Wollny (2007, 2012), in which, despite the clear presence of the nobility, the protagonist is a student of town origin (although, significantly, Kacper becomes ennobled in the fourth volume, which formally makes him a nobleman). Last but not least, the novel cycle *Silva Rerum* by Lithuanian writer Kristina Sabaliauskaitė (2020–2022) would not be termed Neo-Sarmatian, either. Although the story takes place in the 17th century and concerns a noble family, the novel puts in motion codes particular to high culture: it is a multi-faceted family saga, focused on detailed analyses of “internal” adventures of its characters, among which women dominate, and men do not act in a prototypically Sarmatian way. Juxtaposing novels by the authors published

by Fabryka Słów with the aforementioned texts makes it possible to clarify the definition of a prototypical Neo-Sarmatian novel. Thus, it would be a longer narrative / fictional form, belonging to pop culture, most frequently focused on one storyline and most frequently, a part of a longer cycle, so far only written by men and read, above all, also by men³. These novels belong to “predicate” rather than “subject” literature (Todorov 1973). In predicate literature, a two-fold reduction occurs: “firstly, the reduction of the subjectivity of the subject, making it a simple pretext for performing an activity. X kidnaps Y because he is violent, but his violence as a feature of ‘personality’ has only functional character – it facilitates the kidnapping” (Bohuszewicz 2009: 82); secondly, the reduction of the events presented to those which are unusual, adventurous, which tear apart the threads of the everyday, usual existence by the violence of the Happening (Bohuszewicz 2009: 83)⁴. The protagonists of these novels are always men, usually belonging to moderately wealthy nobility, or outlaws, still of noble origin. However, it seems that what is the most specific for this group of texts concerns the ideological plane.

For the purposes of the present text, it suffices to define ideology in a standard manner, that is, as the worldview expressed in the novel which is presented as “natural” and “right” also for the extra-literary world. As Louis Althusser put it in a much quoted fragment of *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*:

For it is characteristic of ideology to impose self-evident facts as self-evident facts (without in the least seeming to, since they are “self-evident”) which we cannot not recognize and before which we have the inevitable and eminently natural reaction of exclaiming (aloud or in “the silence of consciousness”): “That’s obvious! That’s right! That’s true!” (Althusser 2014: 189).

In my opinion, a distinctive feature of Neo-Sarmatian novel consists in ideological naturalization of three values: liberty, masculinity and lordliness (Bo-

3 In reference to Stanisław Krawczyk’s research (see Krawczyk 2022), Agnieszka Urbańczyk shows that Polish fantasy has created a fairly particular subculture, whose symbol is a “kuc” (pony) – a young man with a libertine worldview (Urbańczyk 2021: 268–269) (the metaphor derives from long hair bound in a tail). The validity of this stereotype is confirmed by Tomasz Kołodziejczak, who characterizes a typical representative of this subculture in the following way: “Age: 12–22 years. Gender: man, youth, page (depending on age and experience). Place of residence: city or Warsaw. Music: heavy, uneasy and unpleasant. Reading: speculative fiction, fantasy rather than sf. Favorite beverage: beer. Worldview: liberal (leave me the heck alone). Attitude to religion: indifferent (leave me the heck alone). Attitude to politics: not interested (you also leave me the heck alone). Dressed: carelessly, sometimes with military elements or accessories out of natural materials. Attitude to hygiene: see previous brackets. Additional hobbies: history and/or computers and/or paranormal phenomena. Women: OK, as long as they do not disturb him” (cyt. za: Urbańczyk 2021: 269).

4 The most concise definition of the Happening is provided by Michał Paweł Markowski: “When what happens happens, nothing is as it was and nothing will be the way we thought it would be” (Markowski 2001: 23).

huszewicz 2023: 107–109). The liberty is conceived of here in a particular “libertarian” manner: as entirely uninhibited potential to realize one’s urges and desires, giving in to one’s emotions and the easiness of expressing violent affects. Hence the considerable presence of scenes depicting the characters raging, becoming drunk and overeating, raping and fighting⁵. Although liberty was also the foundation of the Sarmatian (noble) worldview, it is not difficult to notice that Neo-Sarmatians have a particular conception thereof. For a 16th or 17th century nobleman liberty should not be a self-standing value, as texts articulating noble ideology drew a close connection between liberty and other values, such as harmony (*concordia*) (cf. Grzeškowiak-Krwawicz 2021), or it was subordinated to the law, treated as a guarantee of liberty. Neo-Sarmatians refer to Sarmatian liberty, while cutting it off from other values that functioned in Poland of yesteryear as “valves” of a kind, providing safeguard against liberty transforming into wantonness or anarchy (in its popular meaning). They create a construct which is the result of rejecting modernity or even the early modern era due to resentment, given that it is the early modern era that makes an individual curtail their affects and urges (see Elias 2011: 350–371), and then “subjugates” the individual by inscribing them into a range of limitations of legal, bureaucratic, civilizational nature⁶. The protagonist of a prototypical Neo-Sarmatian novel rejects thus understood anthropology, choosing freedom in realizing his emotions, affects and urges.

Neo-Sarmatian fetishization of liberty is connected with another value: masculinity. I use this word, and not its cognate manliness. In male-centric discourse (especially in Poland, marked by the names of such influential writers as Adam Mickiewicz and Henryk Sienkiewicz), manliness is connected with such values as faith or knightliness. As Tomasz Tomasik wrote, “the dominating manifestation of Sarmatian masculinity is the cult of manliness [...]. The perfect Sarmatian man is a knight, a hero and a defender of Catholic faith, participant of a ‘holy’ war” (Tomasik 2013: 85). Neo-Sarmatian pop culture is the result of influence of models as much conservative as they are right-wing; it forgoes the caution in expressing one’s views characteristic for conservatism as well as the worldview referring to the major role of the motherland and religion, which is why within it, traditionally Polish manliness turns into masculinity. In the present day, the category of masculinity appears in a debate with left-

5 Putting aside the most obvious exceptions (such as texts written under totalitarian regimes, wherein ideological doctrine must be carried out in a precise way), the ideological nature of literature is not based on creating fictional equivalents of a given doctrine’s handbooks. This is why I write about a libertarianism particular for Neo-Sarmatian novels, while putting quotation marks around “libertarianism” every time. It is libertarian as much as it fetishizes liberty, but it does not agree with the foundations of libertarianism in its approach to violence. What is characteristic for libertarianism is the rule of non-aggression, according to which nobody has the right to initiate violence, threaten violence or deception towards another person or their property (see e.g. Zwolinski 2016). This obviously contradicts the fairly loose approach to violence in the Neo-Sarmatian novel.

6 As discussed by Michel Foucault.

wing liberalism (cf. Nagle 2017: 87) as a violent negation of ideals of equality and restraint, characteristic for it, as well as the image of a man seen in the context of notions such as rape and domestic violence (Nagle 2017: 87). Neo-Sarmatian nobleman frequently carries out fantasies about liberty as freedom from limitations and freedom to perpetrate physical violence as the basic way of dealing with the world's accidental nature. These fantasies can be more individualistic, as in novels by Komuda (the best known representative of Neo-Sarmatian novel, whose protagonists are always solitary, frequently outlaws) (see e.g. Komuda 1999, 2012, 2019); they can also be communal, as in the *Wilkożacy* [*Cossackwolves*] series by Rafał Dębski (2010, 2012, 2015), in which masculine individualism “dissolves” in a community of wolves⁷. Whether individualistic or communal, Neo-Sarmatian liberty is most often intensely violent in nature, hence the third category – category of lordliness – that I propose in order to discuss prototypical Neo-Sarmatian novels. I took the category of lordliness from Kacper Pobłocki's book *Chamstwo* [*Rabble*] (2021), where it was used as a general category describing social relations in historical, feudal Poland. According to Pobłocki, lordliness is a feature characteristic for feudal society ruled by the principle of subordination. It is not limited to the nobleman – peasant relationship, as it also pertains to relations within, for example, a peasant family, in which wife and children are subordinate to their lord – the husband, while farmhands are subordinate to both the lady and the lord of the house. A Neo-Sarmatian nobleman is a lord – both over the peasants, whom he always treats with contempt, and over women, whom he usually respects, as the weaker sex ought to be respected, but he will not stop himself from rape as soon as he feels an overbearing need to realize his sexual urges (as in the novels *Charakternik* [2019] by Piekara or in Komuda's *Banita* [*The Outlaw*, 2012] and *Diabeł łańcucki* [*The Łańcut Devil*, 2019]). Two caveats need to be made here. Firstly, in these narratives, rape is never carried out by the primary, “good” protagonists, and the narrator never considers it a desirable act. In Neo-Sarmatian novels we are usually dealing with a certain phantasm of violence towards women; its narrativization is a fairly complex process, and its description definitely exceeds the framework of the present text. Secondly, such attitude of men towards women was unacceptable in noble world (paradoxically, it seems to have been more present in peasant rather than noble families).

The aforementioned novels published by the Lublin company Fabryka Słów do not create the entirety of Neo-Sarmatian novel, but, rather, its prototype. I use here a notion common for cognitive linguistics, which used it to deal with the existence of the so-called non-classical categories. Classical categories are such which only contain items with common characteristics. As Georges Kleiber had it,

7 The series protagonists are Cossacks gifted with the supernatural ability to transform into wolves, especially around the full moon, which provides them with wolfish senses and strength even in their human form. Cossackwolves live according to their own code, known as the “Wolf Law”, which puts *sietch* (the community) above the herd, and the herd above the family.

As D. Geeraerts shows it, it is difficult to find conditions necessary and sufficient to contain the totality of possible birds. The features that correspond to the entire extension – “animal”, “has a beak”, “oviparous” – do not make it possible to separate birds from other categories, because other animals also exist, and because other species also lay eggs (e.g. snakes) or have beaks (e.g. platypus). On the other hand, not all elements show features that seem characteristic: ostriches, penguins and chickens cannot fly, kiwi do not have wings, one cannot clearly use the word “feathers” to refer to penguins and kiwi, etc. (Kleiber 2003: 33).

Non-classical categories, that is, such categories where not all items must fulfill conditions necessary and sufficient for being counted among the set, are radial categories: some items will be more typical (we can assume that Polish respondents asked to provide an example of a bird will name the sparrow, as it has wings and flies) – these are the prototypes; other items will be less typical (respondents will be less likely to mention an ostrich or a kakapo, as, despite their having wings, they are flightless birds).

Neo-Sarmatian novel is precisely such a non-classical radial category. The novels published by Fabryka Słów are its prototype, or a “cognitive reference point” (Lakoff 1987: n.p.), the most common item, which is also most frequently identified as an example of the category “Neo-Sarmatian novel”. However, next to the prototype, there also exist secondary poorer examples, and peripheral examples (Stockwell 2005: 29). “Prototypical novels” and “peripheral novels” have many features in common: for example, they all belong to cycles, they all are focused on one storyline, they are usually predicate, rather than subject, novels, their protagonist is a noble man. However, there is one significant difference, which pertains to the ideological layer. An example of such different – peripheral or “secondary poorer” – Neo-Sarmatian novel, whose difference is realized precisely in the layer of worldview and ideology, can be found in Konrad T. Lewandowski’s cycle *Diabłu ogarek* [*Candle-End for the Devil*].

The cycle consists of three novels: *Czarna wierzba* [*The Black Willow*] (2011), *Kolumna Zygmunta* [*Sigismund’s Column*] (2012) and *Ostatni hołd* [*The Last Homage*] (2013). Its difference from Neo-Sarmatian prototype consists in several factors. Firstly, it is actually historical fantasy, in contrast to Komuda’s or Piekara’s novels, which I would situate on the boundary between two sets: historical novel and fantasy novel, with the caveat that they belong more to the first set⁸. In Lewandowski’s prose, fantastic elements are not barely secondary trappings of plot in which events are realistically motivated. On the contrary: the presented world of his novels is a world ruled by principles that cannot be explained either on the basis of rational / empirical worldview or on the basis of attitudes shared by people living in the 17th century Commonwealth

8 On genre belonging of Komuda’s novels see Krawczyk 2022: 97; Szagun 2015.

(which is when the novels take place). Secondly, although the protagonist, similarly to a prototypical Neo-Sarmatian novel, is a solitary man roaming a world that threatens him, the events he participates in are very different. Komuda's, Piekara's, Dębski's, or Liziniewicz's (as of yet unmentioned here: see the series about Nadolski: 2011, 2012, 2013) protagonists always act "in a manly way": they are always lonely, they only take care of themselves, not minding any totality functioning outside their individual existence. In turn, Lewandowski's protagonist, Stanisław Lawendowski, is a court server: he delivers summons, and thus acts in the name of the country and the law. In the third volume of the series we learn that he plays one other, much more significant role. Namely, he is a Keeper of the Order. This is explained by a hermit who tells a story that weaves together the fate of the Lawendowski family with the history of Poland. As it turns out, the initial moment for this entanglement is the point when Christianity was introduced on Polish territory, which became synonymous with the destruction of the earlier, Slavic identity of Polish people. As Stanisław Lawendowski says, "badly had we been baptized" (Lewandowski 2013: 159), which is a reference to the words of the 19th century most prominent eulogist of Slavic history, Zorian Dołęga Chodakowski (1967: 19)⁹. However, in contrast to the approach of the contemporary followers of *Rodzimowierstwo* (Slavic Native Faith), in the novel the fact of "bad baptism" does not mean the need to reject Christianity, given that due to the principle of cooperation, which governs the series about Lawendowski and which I will discuss in a moment, what is proper is not an annihilation of Christianity, but creating harmonious cooperation between it and the native faith. This occurred under the rule of king Casimir the Great (in the years 1333–1370). Due to its significance for the entire ideological layer of the novel, I will quote a longer fragment of *Ostatni hold*:

Badly had we, Poles, been baptized. Violently and with no respect for our ancestors. Hence the disorder and neverending war in the other world, which still rocked everything that was built in the world under the Sun. Thus the young king Casimir reckoned that every thing and every creature must be put in its place and have its own place. What belonged at the bottom should be put at the bottom, the middle – in the middle, and what was from up high – up high. But also the highest should be propped up by the lowest, and the meanest tolerate that which was more lofty. How, indeed, any wall can stand, if its top bricks are in discord with the downmost stones? When these bricks and stones do not want to know a common mortar? And thus, one just measure in the underworld, earthly, and heavenly sphere needed establishing.

9 The phrase quoted here appears in Janusz Tazbir's article dedicated to Maria Janion's *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna* (Tazbir 2007). It is a reference, rather than an accurate quotation from Chodakowski.

For it is concordance that builds, not anger. And so Casimir forbade for Roman Christianity to be propagated by force, and did not hesitate to drown blinded priests who wrought disorder under the Vistula ice. For those who stand against peace and order are always also against the God Supreme, however they would not justify themselves. They should be known not by their lying words, but by the fruit of their endeavors. And so, since the king's will was made law, in Poland, within the borders of the Crown, space was found not only for various spirits, more or less in conflict with God, but also for Jews, Armenians, Eastern Orthodoxy followers, [people of] all faiths (Lewandowski 2013: 159).

This passage is a perfect summary of the worldview and ideology that can be interpreted out of Lewandowski's series. Similarly to Neo-Sarmatian novels, *Czarna wierzba*, *Kolumna Zygmunta* and *Ostatni hołd* take place in 17th century Poland, but in contrast to the former books, here this land is situated in non-autonomous reality, as it is integrated with two other transcendent dimensions: one Christian and one Native Slavic. However, in reference to the latter dimension, one should talk about, rather, the paradoxical immanent transcendence, in accordance to Lewandowski's own approach; in the essay *Teologia wiary rodzimej* [*Theology of Native Faith*] he wrote about the fact that the pagan worldview does not acknowledge an absolute external to the world, as God does not exist outside the world, being, rather, its essence or the principle of its rationality (Lewandowski 2017: 19), not finding his own existence outside it.

Komuda's, Piekara's, Dębski's, Liziniewicz's worlds are always purely materialistic. And they are so even when they are permeated by an extra-empirical dimension. This paradox will be best explained by a reference to an extreme example, that is, Rafał Dębski's *Wilkozacy* series. As has already been mentioned, the eponymous *Wilkozacy* (Cossackwolves) are Cossacks who turn into wolves during the full moon. However, what is the result of this magical transformation? Does it introduce a new, extra-sensual, extra-empirical, extra-rational element into this world? On the contrary: when turned into wolves, the Cossacks burn villages, kill and rape, they are simply more efficient at it as compared to ordinary humans, and therefore, a Cossack's transformation into a wolf only denotes a certain anthropological degradation, a fall into a purely animalistic order through maximizing the order based on urges and affects. Sarmatian masculinity can be realized in a nobleman's *żupan*, with a sable and a goblet in hand, but also as a wolf on the steppe; in the end, however, the result is the same: subordination of the world until its annihilation, whose tools are, invariably, rape and murder. In Lewandowski's series, the presented world is based on the opposite of this vulgar masculine phantasm, for it is ruled, as I have already stated, by the principle of cooperation. A broader description thereof is significant due both to the series as such, and to the fact that it makes it possible to talk about Neo-Sarmatism different from the right-wing one.

This cooperation is a principle that regulates relations between the following elements of the presented world of the *Diabłu ogarek* series: a) between two extra-empirical orders (Christian and that of Slavic Native Faith); b) between extra-empirical orders on the one hand and the earthly order on the other; c) between a human and the natural order; d) between a nobleman inscribed into his family and country and the law.

Explaining the two first kinds of cooperation stumbles upon a certain issue of biographical nature. As we know from Lewandowski's text *Politeizm vs. monoteizm* [*Polytheism V. Monotheism*], the *Diabłu ogarek* series was written while its author was converting from Christianity (Protestantism) to Slavic Native Faith (see Lewandowski 2015). The novels about Stanisław Lawendowski put a kind of a stop to this motion. On their declarative level, directly verbalized by the narrator and some of the characters, Christianity plays a considerable role in the presented world; however, one can get the impression that this is only tribute paid to the historical reality to which these novels refer (Christianity was an important element of noble culture at every stage of its existence). The impression that Christianity is insignificant is multiplied by anti-Jesuit excursions, frequent in all volumes, based on the conviction that Jesuits are an order that wants to destroy the system of the Commonwealth as based on the mutual cooperation of various beings¹⁰. Jesuits, as Mr Sobieski says in *Kolumna Zygmunta*, propose a new kind of authority: a kind of *absolutum dominium*, the worst possible thing for a nobleman (as it strikes into noble liberties and centralizes authority). Jesuit authority opposes the noble republican anthropology, according to which the apparatus of power should not have control over the person's insides; it also opposes the principle of cooperation between Christianity and paganism, which is so important in Lewandowski's presented world. Thus, in the end, in Lewandowski's novels there is ambivalence as to the status of Christianity: although it is talked about as an important and positive sphere, it is almost always harmful for social order when it is represented in action (there is nothing strange about this ambivalence, as it is impossible to reconcile a monotheist order, with its belief in "extra-world" God, with polytheism and its belief in God that does not exist outside the world). This remains consistent with what Lewandowski wrote about Christianity in his theological treatise concerning Slavic Native Faith:

The fall of the First Republic of Poland was the result of a fundamental inability to reconcile polytheistic republican tradition with Catholic monotheism, which supported absolutism. The Polish state fell because a republican Pole could not be, simultaneously, a Catholic Pole. The

¹⁰ The anti-Jesuit character of Lewandowski's series remains consistent with the general antipathy of some noblemen towards this order. Sarmatian anti-Jesuit texts are collected in Janusz Tazbir's anthology (Tazbir 1963).

multi-national and multi-religious Commonwealth became politically unsteerable when it came under the domination of intolerant, ultra-Catholic counter-reformation. The Polish national sense and the Polish reason of state cannot be realized by religious fanatics convinced that there is one God, one religious doctrine and one political reason. Thus, the domination of Catholicism in politics results in ceaseless exclusion of subsequent social groups, in the state being torn apart and weakened, as happened in the 18th century and as we can see it now. Only, the Jesuits of old were supplanted by the Redemptorists¹¹ (Lewandowski 2017: 74).

When it comes to the order within Slavic Native Faith, the matters are very different: it does not only belong to the declarative order, but, rather, it truly works, playing the role of one of the principles that provide structure to the presented world of *Diabłu ogarek*. As has already been mentioned, according to the Slavic Native Faith, God does not exist outside the world, being, rather, its essence or the principle of its rationality. This does not contradict polytheism (various gods and goddesses are different manifestations of divinity), or animism, that is, belief in the existence of various spiritual beings, or even – to be more precise – belief in the spiritual character of natural order. What we are dealing here is a great chain of being, whose topmost element is God, the lower rungs are deities, and the lowest – minor spiritual beings. Importantly, this entire triad does not exist outside of the natural order, but, rather, acts through it, resulting in magical effects. This is very clearly shown in the novel *Kolumna Zygmunta*, whose first sentence is as follows: “A pine grew on a small sandy dune” (Lewandowski 2012: 7). The pine is an unusual tree, as it does not grow on the dune as much as stands upon in, for:

the foundation of the trunk from which roots protruded was located over two ells above ground. Thus the tree stood on over a dozen spindly legs, akin to an ocean-dwelling kraken or another cephalopod taken out of drawings illustrating the adventures of Spanish and English sailors. The only difference was that here a familiar forest under Węgrowo hummed around (Lewandowski 2012: 7).

This tree – of unknown age: some say it is 80 years old, some, that it has always existed – is approached by our protagonist. He comes to it unarmed, as he knows that the tree “did not like when people approached it with any blades” (Lewandowski 2012: 7). Some daredevils once tried to do so – they were Calvinists who considered the pine cursed: they decided to cut it down and make a cross out of it. “These were new settlers who had not yet under-

11 When writing about the Redemptorists, Lewandowski means the order to which Father Tadeusz Rydzyk, a figure of immense popularity in Polish folk conservatism, belongs. Rydzyk founded the Radio Maryja station which, in common opinion, is a speaking-tube for folk Catholicism.

stood the first law of the Masovian land: that here there was place for each godly and ungodly creature, as long as it did not threaten the neighbors and respected others' possessions" (Lewandowski 2012: 7). In the end, "the pine allowed the server to approach it" (Lewandowski 2012: 9), Mr Lawendowski takes water hemlock and, as a result, sees movement in the cage of the pine's roots: these are imps which he puts into the bottle.

Another example of cooperation between the extra-empirical and earthly orders, as well as between human and natural order comes from *Ostatni hołd*, where Lawendowski's helper, Grzesiek, becomes bitten by an elemental and, as a result, starts turning into a tree. Aid comes in the shape of Maciej, a constantly drunk, ordinary, not very learned monk of St. Bernard's order. Maciej suggests that Grzesiek be saved by being put into a willow's hollow: as a result, instead of drying out, Grzesiek lives, as his body fills with juices of the tree with which he is growing together. Afterwards, Stanisław Lawendowski wonders if they should carve a cross into the tree, but Maciej responds that Grzesiek is not in a grave and that the Christian order should not be mixed with the pagan one. Enchanted into a willow, Grzesiek is now in the power of the "pre-Christian" order, the monk says, and this should be respected (Lewandowski 2013: 47–50).

There are many such examples in all three novels. They all confirm the existence of the principle of cooperation between various dimensions of being as fundamental for the presented word of Lewandowski's novels. Both Lewandowski the court server and Maciej the monk act according to a Sarmatian principle, borrowed from the antiquity and well-woven into this world, namely, that of golden mediocrity (Lat. *aurea mediocritas*), which is realized in many ways in the novels – in this case, as the level and kind of knowledge available to both characters. They are neither fools (devoid of any knowledge) nor wise men (who have impractical, theoretical knowledge): they are situated somewhere in between. Their knowledge is practical, that is, it is a result of submission to the "subject of cognition", which – due to the world being animated through inscription into the animistic dimension – is not a subject, after all. The pine is alive, it sends signals that have to be read in the right way, and this will only happen when Mr Stanisław becomes appropriately attuned to its "speech". A similar situation occurs with Maciej and his knowledge about the willow: it was not read in learned books, but, rather, practiced in living contact with reality that changes every time. We are dealing here with a reversal of phantasmically "masculine" prototypical Neo-Sarmatism, as the knowledge at Stanisław's and Maciej's (and other characters', whom I cannot name due to compositional limitations of my text) disposal is the kind of knowledge whose patron in new humanities is considered a woman – Mêtis. Mêtis is an underappreciated goddess of the Greek pantheon, the one to have given Cronos an emetic, making it possible for the future Olympian gods to leave their father's body. As Ewa Klekot notes, the goddess symbolizes practical knowledge:

Mêtis is the kind of knowledge that is difficult to obtain other than through participation and which is difficult to generalize. To a large degree, it is extra-linguistic in nature, based on experience and practice which forces one to confront subsequent similar, but never identical situations demanding quick adjustment. [...] Above all, Mêtis is situated knowledge – situated not in a body as such but in the relationship between this body with the world here and now (Klekot 2018: 85).

This situated knowledge – always “weaker”, submissive, feminine more than masculine (Klekot 2018: 87) – is, simultaneously, indigenous knowledge, that is, “local” or “native”: looking at the world “‘from the inside’, that is, from the point of view of local and indigenous knowledges and ways of cognition” (Domańska 2024: 12; cf. Hart 2010: 3–4). The culture from which this knowledge draws is Slavic culture, as it is Slavic (imagined) religious practices that Slavic Native Faith reconstructs¹².

Referring to Slavic tradition, Lewandowski derives another level of cooperation: between an individual and a family, and between an individual and country and the law. As he writes in *Teologia wiary rodzimej*:

we should be aware that ancient Slavs were not individualistic in the way we are. At that time, a person was a part of the family and self-identified with the family to such a degree that being excluded from this community was equal to death, definitely civil death, and frequently [led] to suicide (Lewandowski 2017: 90–91).

The final meaning of all Lawendowski’s actions is revealed in the last volume of the series, when it turns out that the Lawendowski family members are Keepers of the Order once established by King Casimir the Great. “This whole time I was convinced that I serve bigger matters than the order of the tribunal” (Lewandowski 2013: 158), Mr Stanisław says when he finds out that he acts on behalf of a totality larger than he is, the family totality, which, in turn, is subordinated to the metaphysical totality. In the quoted fragment one can also detect an interesting convergence between the metaphysical order and the existential/political order, which I would like to mention now.

In direct contrast to the protagonists of prototypical Neo-Sarmatian novels, Mr Lawendowski does not take up private actions; neither is he presented, as it happens in all novels and short stories by the most famous Neo-Sarmatian, Komuda, according to the “libertarian” fantasy of a “nobleman” – a figure whose identity is realized in actions connected with fighting for private prop-

12 In contrast to the cases of Nordic, Germanic or Celtic culture, Christianity was introduced in Slavic territories by the means of “fire and sword”, annihilating the remainders of pagan culture. Therefore, in today’s attempts at reconstructing Slavic beliefs there appears a “constructivist” element: in the situation of absence of sources showcasing Native Slavic deities, one has to “guess” at them, adding one’s own invention to the reconstructive element.

erty. Above all, Mr Lawendowski is a court server, and thus “a public person”¹³. What does a court server do? He acts on behalf of the court, and the court, in turn, carries out the law. In the first volume of the series we encounter Mr Lawendowski when he delivers a summons to Mr Bartnicki. In the second volume, as we already know, Mr Stanisław tricks imps into entering a bottle of aquavit – they will later aid him in a task he is supposed to carry out for the king. In turn, in *Ostatni Hold*, we find Lawendowski in the chambers of the assessor Wygonowski (in the First Polish Republic, an assessor rounded up the composition of the court and advised the judge), accompanied by other representatives of the court: the *subiudex*, writer and the applicant. They all discuss two lawsuits concerning propination laws¹⁴: one on behalf of Jesuit priests, the other on behalf of the *starosta*. The Jesuits accuse *starosta* Myszowicki of inducing peasants to drink his beer, while Myszowicki accuses the Jesuits of inducing peasant to “have the landowner’s beer in contempt and frequent the priestly inn” (Lewandowski 2013: 9). As we can see, the connection between the protagonist, the law and the state in Lewandowski’s novels is a necessary one, that is to say, one that produces the character and the plot in which the character realizes his identity. This connection is of the same kind that the one described above: the protagonist acts in the name of a higher order. Paradoxically, however, this subordination does not mean the disappearance of individuality and liberty: to the contrary, it is their condition.

In order to describe this paradoxical relationship, I will refer to Hegelian philosophy, in which the law establishes “commonly recognized and also formally (‘externally’) guaranteed principles of societal co-existence” (Siemek 1988: 91). These principles are abstracted from the particularity/subjectivity of specific person, guaranteeing that in their place, there will appear “a rationalizing rule of principles”:

In Hegelian social theory “abstract law” is, therefore, not only a stair preceding “morality”. To the contrary, it constitutes another dimension – or, to be more precise and follow the letter of the *Element of the Philosophy of Right*, even the primary one, meaning also, the more important one – of liberty as a principle of the modern world in its inter-subjective universalization (Siemek 1988: 105)¹⁵.

13 I use the differentiation between a private and a public person, as well as their images in novels and epic poetry after Mikhail Bakhtin (1982: 307–308).

14 “Propination is the right of the landowner to produce and sell beverages on the territory of his own land making up the so-called propination area. The right was used both due to one owning land, and due to privilege enabling one to produce alcohol, as obtained from the landowner” (Michalewicz 1992: 104).

15 I wrote more broadly about Hegelian philosophy of right in a context fairly close to the issues discussed in the present text in Bohuszewicz 2024.

When mentioning Hegel, we only seemingly leave the world of nobility. Indeed, this connection between the law and liberty, at first glance paradoxical, is close to the Old Polish conception of liberty, which was, after all, fairly distant from contemporary Neo-Sarmatian fantasies on the subject. Cicero, one of the founding fathers of discourse on state, as well as one of the writers most important for the Old Polish nobility, drew attention to the fact that the three most popular systems – monarchy, aristocracy and the rule of the people – are prone to degeneration, because the rulers are people, who yield to their own subjectivity. This is why the best political system is the fourth one, in which law was supposed to rule. It is, as Jakub Witczak wrote, a republican system:

The law is characterized by its constancy – in contrast to the king, the elite or the people, in whose nature lies letting go of reason for the sake of feelings. Thus, the rule of the law introduced stability into the country. In order to keep it up, it was also necessary to retain balance between the three elements of classic systems: the king, the representatives of aristocracy and representatives of the people. Their privileges and duties were described by the law that everyone was subject to. In this way, society in a state with a mixed system appears as a community living under stable laws, acting for the general good, where nobody has advantage over another, so everyone is free and independent from others, and everybody is equal to everybody else (Witczak 2015: 23).

These may be the most important words of this fragment: given that nobody has advantage over another, everyone is free. This is what the principle of cooperation I wrote about at the beginning consists in. The novelty introduced into the Neo-Sarmatian symbolic universe by Lewandowski's novels is showing that this principle of cooperation, realized in its most perfect manner in the Polish state, is older than Cicero's ideas, as it can be derived from the more primordial order of the Slavic tradition. Indeed, the Slavic tradition is built upon an assembly system, where the ruler is chosen by the community and described as the first among equals (see Lewandowski 2017: 72), in opposition to monarchies, where the ruler is anointed by God, which means that he is due unconditional obedience.

The example of Lewandowski's novels makes it possible for us to see that there is a certain uncarried out potentiality in Sarmatism. This heretofore lack of actualization results from the fact that Sarmatism has been almost entirely appropriated by its right-wing formulations – resentimental in this way or another (towards the broadly understood modernity), exclusive (towards subordinated groups, not included in Neo-Sarmatism) and patriarchal ("lordly") (see Czapliński 2011). Against anti-modern resentment, exclusivity and patriarchy, Lewandowski situates a world that I would gladly refer to as democratic: moreover, I would use democratic in the broadest sense of the notion of democracy as democratization of different forms of existence, namely,

one including earthly and non-earthly beings, human and non-human ones, as well as regulating relations within the human world (see Bryant 2011). It is a democratic order, because each of the elements of these relations has its own subjectivity, it works and remains free due to being obedient to the law (both earthly and non-earthly law). At the same time, it is incredibly interesting that the democratic nature of Lewandowski's series is prone neither to resentment nor to imitation, for it is not created in opposition to Western democracy, or as its imitation, but, rather, as reference to Slavic tradition. Obviously, the latter is also contextualized, or imagined, in a particular way; however, this way differs from the prototypical libertarian Neo-Sarmatism, as liberty – the very essence of both projects – is not conceived as freedom devoid of safeguards, but as cooperation between various elements that are parts of larger totalities: metaphysical (Christian and polytheistic/animistic otherworld) and social (family, country, the law). In the end, the example of Lewandowski's series of novels demonstrates that it is possible for Neo-Sarmatism different from the right-wing one to exist, even if as a margin of the category.

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