

Old Poland Historiography (Post-)Colonially Split? Maciej Strykowski and his Epic History of Lithuania

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Towards the end of the twentieth-century, Alexander Kiossev proposed a postcolonial model to assess the condition of East, Central, and Southern European Culture – cultures he described as “self-colonizing.”¹ For Kiossev, the nuances of this persistent historical phenomenon consisted of the construction of national identity on the basis of foreign models assimilated from cultures more developed (in terms of historiography, literature, art, and even

¹ See: A. Kiossev, *Notes on Self-Colonizing Cultures*, [in:] B. Pejic, D. Elliott (ed.), *After The Wall. Art and Culture in post-Communism Europe*, Stockholm 1999. See also: J. Sowa, *Fantomowe ciało króla. Peryferyjne zmagania z nowoczesną formą*, Krakow 2011, pp. 20–25.

political, legislative, and economic structures) than the “self-colonizing” cultures. At the heart of the historian’s argument lies the claim that peripheral formations adopt inferior positions vis-à-vis the center not because they have succumbed to a compulsory dependency on outside forces, but because even in the nascent developmental state of national subjectivity, they embraced a model of their own inferiority.² This situation stems from recognizing one’s cultural otherness in relation to a set of values deemed universal, and from consciously reckoning with the fact that as “inferior” cultures, they are a reservoir of societal lacks.³ One such lack was the presumed dearth of grand historical narratives on the early origins of the nations of East-Central Europe— narratives formed in the medieval and renaissance eras in the spirit of dominant ideology: the more deeply rooted a culture is in antiquity, the greater its inherent value and entitlement to nobility.⁴

Old Polish writing of the sixteenth century offers several clear instances of the self-colonizing construction of national identity. As is well known, this period witnessed the rapid formation of national identities in the younger nations of East-Central Europe, and Europe more generally. To be more specific, we can look to Stanisław Orzechowski’s legendary thesis of the Sarmatians’ origins in Ancient Greece, argued in his political and historical writing. Orzechowski’s position was preceded by similar arguments made by Jan Długosz and other acclaimed

² Ibid, p. 21.

³ Cited in: Ibid.

⁴ For instance, see: B. Bednarek, *Epos europejski*, Wrocław 2001, p. 77.

Polish historians.⁵ Also relevant is the Polish-Lithuanian historian and renaissance poet Maciej Strykowski's⁶ attempt to trace the ethnic origins of Lithuanians back to Ancient Rome.

Setting aside the now-corroborated fact that the nomadic Sarmatian people never even came near Poland's borders⁷ and that the Polish "Sarmatian" class was most certainly a legacy fabricated to feed the megalomania of the aristocracy,⁸ in the former and latter cases (Polish and Lithuanian), the search for ethnic origins in antiquity was intended to elevate a nation that was in fact developmentally delayed on a cultural, systemic, economic and national level. This doubled as a way to assimilate Poland and Lithuania, at least partially, into the sphere of Western logocentrism (the tradition of rhetoric and the poetics of antiquity) and the metaphysics of presence (the history of classical philosophy).

There is surely no need here to point out that Ancient Greece and Rome furnished the Polish National Revival with ideal templates to emulate – this was true in the context of poetic theory (mimesis), political and cultural institutions (politeia), and the moral precepts of historiography, which are best described under the banner of Ci-

⁵ See: Ł. Lipiński, *Stanisław Orzechowski i jego grecka etnogeneza Polaków jako legitymizacja kultury szlacheckiej*, "Tekstura. Rocznik filologiczno-kulturoznawczy" 1(6)/2015, pp. 179–190.

⁶ See: M. Strykowski, *O początkach, wywodach, dzielnościach, sprawach rycerskich i domowych sławnego narodu litewskiego, żemojdzkiego i ruskiego, przedtym nigdy od żadnego ani kuszone, ani opisane, z natchnienia Bożego a uprzejmie pilnego doświadczenia*, ed. J. Radziszewska, Warsaw 1978.

⁷ See: A. Zieliński, *Sarmaci. Katolicy. Zwycięzcy. Kłamstwa, przemilczenia i półprawdy w historii Polski*, Warsaw 2015, pp. 96–98.

⁸ See: J. Niedźwiedz, *Sarmatyzm, czyli tradycja wynaleziona*, "Teksty Drugie" 1/2015.

cero's maxim *historia vitae magistra est*. In the sixteenth century, the poetry, rhetoric, and slowly-forming national institutions of Old Poland referenced the founding arguments of the major classical and early modern masters of poetry (Aristotle, Horace, Francesco Robortello, and Julius Caesar Scaliger), and the rhetorical principles of the Ancient Roman orator Cicero. As we know, what these figures have in common is their status as the protagonists or heirs of great empires – Ancient Greece and Rome. These empires provided a template for national formation that was emulated in nearly all spheres of human life. This imitative process can be read as a symptom of cultural self-colonization. As Jan Sowa argues in his book *The King's Phantom Body*, Poland's status as an object of postcolonial critique is complex, for over the course of a century, the country has been embedded in various colonial projects in diverse roles, as both subject and object.⁹ As is well known, between the fourteenth-century Union of Krewo and the last decades of the sixteenth century, the Crown of the Kingdom of Poland led a colonial campaign against the Grand Duchy of Lithuania that formally culminated in the 1569 Union of Lublin. "On the strength of the Lublin parliament's decrees of 1569 resulting in the Polish-Lithuanian Union, Podlasie, Wołyń, and the Braclaw and Kiev regions have been severed from the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and incorporated into the Polish Crown."¹⁰ The following centuries, on the other hand, witnessed the gradual disintegration of the political and cultural institutions that

⁹ J. Sowa, op. cit., p. 26.

¹⁰ J. Pelenski, *Inkorporacja ukraińskich ziem dawnej Rusi do Korony w 1569 roku. Ideologia i korzyści – próba nowego spojrzenia*, "Przegląd Historyczny" 2(65)/1974, p. 243.

made up the Jagiellonian nation. This ultimately resulted in three subsequent stages of the nation's colonization – a period we learn to call “the three partitions of Poland” from a history curriculum that is hardly postcolonial.

From the perspective of self-colonization, this first phase seems particularly interesting: elements of “standard” colonization (the takeover of a regime and the imposition of cultural templates: Polonization, Christianization) coexist with elements of self-colonization (the submission of the self to a narrative of internal societal inferiority). In the former and latter cases, Old Polish historiography was leveraged as a rhetorical instrument in the early formation of national identity. This historiography projected collective images of the past and present day that embraced Poland's own past as well as that of its Eastern Neighbors – in particular, the so-called Kresy region as a historical region of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.¹¹ It was undoubtedly precisely here, in this region deemed “the Kresy” by collective memory and the Polish imaginary,¹² that Poland assumed a position of colonial power and submitted local populations to its sovereignty.¹³

What role, then, was played by Maciej Strykowski's Lithuanian historiography in the process of colonizing and

¹¹ Jerzy Giedroyc [...] has described Ukraine, Lithuania, and Belarus as ULB – the region corresponding to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. A. Bumblauskas, *Wielkie Księstwo Litewskie. Wspólna historia, podzielona pamięć*, trans. A. Malewska, Warsaw 2013, p. 11.

¹² The region known as the Kresy stretches between the Dniester and Dnieper Rivers. On the Western side, it is bordered by Kiev, on the Southern side, by the Pripjat River, and on the East, by Novohrad-Volynskyi, in the former seat of the Volhynian, Kiev, and Podolian Governorates that are today part of the Kiev, Zhytomyr, Khmelnytskyi, and Vinnytsia oblasts. K. Brown, *Kresy. Biografia krainy, której nie ma. Jak zniszczono wielokulturowe pogranicze*, trans. A. Czwojdrak, Krakow 2013, p. 15.

¹³ J. Sowa, op. cit., p. 26.

self-colonizing the Grand Duchy of Lithuania? To begin to respond to this question, we might consider the specific cultural splitting of the Old Polish historical chronicle between a genealogical identity and an imagined or fabricated one. Sergey Kovalev makes a sound point when he argues that Strykowski was perhaps the most salient figure among Polish-language Renaissance writers active in Lithuania and Belarus. Strykowski was of Polish descent (*gente Polonus*) and Lithuanian by political orientation (*natione Lithuanus*).¹⁴ He was a Polish (of Polish extraction) historian of Lithuania as the author of *On the Beginnings of the Famed Nation of Lithuania*. He was simultaneously a Lithuanian historian, as court chronicler under the patronage of Prince Yuri Olelkovich III, to whom Strykowski dedicated his work. In the capacity of Polish historian, he became a vessel for symbolic (poetic and historical) colonial mechanisms by convincing the Polish-Lithuanian reader of the cultural “deficiencies” plaguing Lithuanian culture. In the capacity of Lithuanian historian, however, as *natione Lithuanu*, he contributed to the formation of a self-colonizing identity for Lithuanians by writing as the representative of another nation and affirming the narrative of delayed cultural development.

In the historical prose of one of his chronicles, we encounter the symbolic mechanisms of colonial domination alongside those of self-colonization, the latter of which acknowledge the peripheral nations’ inferiority to their looming, central counterparts as points of reference. Strykowski conceded

¹⁴ S. Kowalow, *Maciej Strykowski jako poprzednik Alberta Wijuka Kojalowicza: spojrzenie białoruskie*, “Senoji Lietuvos Literatūra,” 27/2009, p. 216.

this inferiority on two levels: as a Pole, he tried to frame his own identity as historian against the templates of antiquity broadcast by the Western European Renaissance. Meanwhile, as a Lithuanian, he conceded the inferiority of a nation whose history he sought to publicize. His overarching motive was to legitimize colonial activity, and his varied ideals can be described as a kind of “renaissance humanism.” To follow the argument Leela Gandhi makes in her book *Postcolonial Theory*:

In understanding postcolonialisms’s vexed relationship with humanism, it is important to recognize that postcolonial studies inherits two chronologically distinct, if ideologically overlapping, approaches to the history and consequences of humanism. The first is concerned with humanism as a cultural and educational program which began in Renaissance Italy in about the mid-sixteenth century and evolved progressively into the area of studies we now practice and preach as the humanities. The second distinctly post-structuralist approach [...] identifies humanism with the theory of subjectivity and knowledge philosophically inaugurated by Bacon, Descartes and Locke, and scientifically substantiated by Galileo and Newton.¹⁵

Given the circumstances surrounding the origins of the historical and epic work *On the Beginnings of the Famed Nation of Lithuania*, written by Maciej Strykowski – Polish poet-historian and diplomat and serviceman under the

¹⁵ L. Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: An Introduction*, New York – Chichester – West Sussex, 1998, p. 28.

patronage of Lithuanian Prince Yuri Olelkovich III – what is most relevant for our purposes is the context of renaissance humanism, and in particular, the role of knowledge and power as dual categories. These categories are crucial for the relationship between colonialism and humanism precisely because “[r]enaissance humanism and its inheritors insist that man is made human by the things he knows [...]”¹⁶ As Ghandi writes, while both kinds of humanism assert that “all human beings are, as it were, the measure of all things, they simultaneously smuggle a disclaimer into their celebratory outlook. The humanist valorization of man is almost always accompanied by a barely discernible corollary which suggests that some human beings are more human than others – either on account of their access to superior learning, or on account of their cognitive faculties.”¹⁷

In his treatise of Lithuanian history, Strykowski essentially admits that he was driven to the project by the previous lack of any kind of historiography of the nation:

*Nevertheless, out of my earnestness towards the humble work I now undertake, it might perturb the reader to know that as I approached this grand history so neglected over the course of centuries and covered now with dust, there was no precedent to follow. For before me, no man has ever set foot on this path, nor has any man been tempted to.*¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 29.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ M. Strykowski, op. cit., p. 34.

Treading on allegedly virgin intellectual soil, Strykowski returns several times throughout the text to the deficiencies in Lithuanian historiography and directs the reader's attention to the presumed intellectual handicap of Lithuanian historians ("Lithuania is enamored with war, its people are so adept and witty, with the exception of those from Moscow, they have had no simple writers and many of their acclaimed valors have gone unmarked").¹⁹ As Dariusz Skórczewski has astutely observed, a signature feature of the colonial strategy of rhetorical orientalism is this: if the Western subject (in this case, Strykowski as historiographic subject) "speaks of the Orient and its populations at all, he does so exclusively in the context of his own wanderings, emotions, dilemmas, and needs."²⁰ ("And so I [...] follow my intuition and wit..."; "before me no man walked this road..."; "on my own whims towards this nation..."; "The Good Lord himself charged me with this work..." and so on). Moreover:

[Edward] Said has introduced a notion that has become a critical point of departure for thinking about Poland and East and Central Europe: the ramifications of dependency and dominance extend beyond issues such as economic backwardness or weakness within international politics. Cultural dependency and subordination also play critical roles – appearing as an inability to automatically form one's own basic

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ D. Skórczewski, *Retoryka pominięcia i przemilczenia a prawda literatury: o postkolonialnych implikacjach praktyk dyskursywnych*, [in:] H. Gosk, B. Karwowska (ed.), *(Nie)obecność. Pominięcia i przemilczenia w narracjach XX wieku*, Warsaw 2008, p. 95.

constitution. Imperial and colonial domination entail the imposition of trade regulations along with specific modes of self-perception. These modes may appear as false to the colonized party, but in spite of this, they continue to influence the subordinated people's images of the self. This results in the formation of a series of complexes, resentments, and – perhaps most importantly – a chronic inability to automatically form judgments and forge one's own values, which is to say, the normative construction of social reality. The subordinated always awaits the regime's assessment of who and what is worthy of respect – even within the jurisdiction of his own country. For the subordinated, true success cannot be conferred by one's own countrymen, for it requires the approval of the Other who dictates the symbolic order on a broader international and multicultural level and has exclusive right to construct the image of the subordinated.²¹

One might easily suspect that Maciej Strykowski's historical narrative is in fact a hegemonic historiography – the kind of chronicle that leverages selective facts and poetic images to prove that the ethnic group or nation it describes cannot express itself autonomously and in its own name. By Strykowski's logic, as an object of colonial historical discourse, the Lithuanian nation and its chroniclers cannot tell their own history. This condition is somewhat analogical to the condition of the child, as

²¹ J. Sowa, op. cit., pp. 434–435.

described by a postmodernist precursor of postcolonial critique, Jean-François Lyotard:

Shorn of speech, incapable of standing upright, hesitating over the objects of its interest, not able to calculate its advantages, not sensitive to common reason, the child is eminently the human because its distress heralds and promises things possible. Its initial delay in humanity, which makes it the hostage of the adult community, is also what manifests to this community the lack of humanity it is suffering from, and which calls on it to become more human.²²

To critique the hegemonic condition underlying Strykowski's historiography, we might add that here, the subject writing the history makes a gesture to symbolically conscript the collective figure of the Other into the jurisdiction of his own images – images that previously (before the Grand Duchy of Lithuania's history was written) managed to dodge the dominion of Western Reason as a template to emulate. The project therefore carries the torch of the humanist enlightenment of “under-educated” Lithuanians. If humanist Reason is by definition universal (if it were otherwise, we would never understand each other), then how can it attend to the particular? Naturally, it assimilates what differs from Reason and reorganizes that content according to its own criteria. As a result, all that is personal, local, and individual is tamed (made legible). Even more importantly, it is submitted to the jurisdiction

²² J.-F. Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. G. Bennington, R. Bowlby, Stanford 1991, pp. 3-4, cited in: L. Gandhi, op. cit., p. 37.

of a subject that will then freely exploit it by way of images constructed on the subject's own terms.²³

Let us now return to renaissance humanism and Sarmatianism. These themes take on an interesting light in the postcolonial context – a context crucial for understanding the work discussed here, which is, after all, a historical representation of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania's history. Renaissance humanism developed in Western Europe during an era of rapid advancement in rhetoric and poetics. As a continuation of the Greco-Roman legacy, this culture was defined by its pursuit of hierarchical and normative concepts. We can therefore speak of the “colonial” implications of genealogical and rhetorical taxonomies, as they insist on the superiority of certain elements over others. This results in the manufacturing of inequalities by isolating “inferior” or “handicapped” elements.

The colonial implications of renaissance humanism (first and foremost in terms of the notion of “superiority”) are present in the social consciousness surrounding Poland's genealogy during the national revival. According to this mindset, the highest entity in genealogical hierarchy was the historical epic poem, which paid homage to the historical epic as a rhetorical model established by Lucan in the *Pharsalia*.²⁴ Strykowski adopted Lucan's model of the *historical* (didactic) epic to write *Chronicle of Poland*,

23 A. Burzyńska, M.P. Markowski, *Teorie literatury XX wieku*. Podręcznik, Krakow 2009, pp. 557-558.

24 S. Nieznanowski, *Staropolska epopeja historyczna. Kształtowanie się pojęcia, drogi rozwoju*, [in:] J. Pelc (ed.), *Problemy literatury staropolskiej*, S. 1, Wrocław 1972, pp. 394-405.

Lithuania...,²⁵ and *On the Beginnings of the Famed Nation of Lithuania* (“Although the latter work is more concerned with citing sources and supplying the page numbers of cited works, at least in certain passages. Even more startling are the unidentified sources in *Chronicle*”).²⁶ However, despite the programmatic declarations of loyalty to historical fact embedded in the epic, which was practically a “deviant” poetic concept (as in the sixteenth century), Strykowski throws his competence as historian, pedagogue and truth-teller into question by indulging several times in the deliberate fictionalization of historical facts. We find examples of this device in his earlier work *On the Beginnings...*, and the later *Chronicle*, where Strykowski countermands historical sources presumably known to him in his description of the Christianization of Samogitia, which he ascribes to the Polish King Władysław Jagiełło and his cousin Witold, a Lithuanian prince. Yet the Bychowiec Chronicle, a foundational historical source on Lithuania and Russia, informs us that the Church of Saint Peter in Miedniki was in fact established *exclusively* on the order of Prince Witold, who is fully credited for the expansion of Christianity throughout Samogitia and the Vilnius region.²⁷

An in-depth analysis of the rhetorical colonial mechanisms at play in Maciej Strykowski’s historiography would necessarily exceed the scope of a brief article, and

²⁵ Ibid, p. 405.

²⁶ Z. Wojtkowiak, *Maciej Strykowski: dziejopis Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego: kalendarium życia i działalności*, Poznań 1990, p. 196.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 201.

this text offers only a cursory glance. My sole aim is to demonstrate a first attempt at such an analysis. A meticulous and critical investigation into the legacy of Strykowski and other Polish historiographers might contribute to a broader awareness of postcolonial consciousness that would yield new and unbiased knowledge on multiculturalism and the fluid identities and languages of the area grouped together as the Republic's former Kresy.²⁸

Translated by Eliza Cushman Rose

²⁸ The Polish word "Kresy" implies the "edge" or "frontier" of Polish territory. (Translator's Note)