



ANNA GOMÓŁA

University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland
Katowicų Silezijos universitetas, Lenkija

KINDRED, ALIEN, OTHER IN THE ANALYSIS OF JAN MICHAŁ WITORT'S MEMOIR

Giminingas, Svetimas, Kitas
Jano Michała Witorto Memuarų analizėje

SANTRAUKA

Straipsnis skirtas Janui Michałui Witortui (1853–1903), politiniam veikėjui, etnografui ir redaktoriui. 1895 m. jis paskelbė memuarus apie 1875–1879 metus, praleistus egzilyje Archangelsko gubernijoje. Šis tekstas domina tyrėjus kaip skirtingų kultūrų simbiozės refleksija. Jis aprašė Europos civilizacijos reprezentaciją etikos terminais ir kategorijomis.

SUMMARY

The following article is devoted to Jan Michał Witort (1853–1903), a political activist, a columnist and an ethnographer. Between 1875 and 1879, he lived in exile in Arkhangelsk Governorate, an experience he would later recount in a memoir written around 1895. The text is particularly interesting as it reflects the early attitude of the future researcher towards people from other cultures. He describes representatives of the European civilisation in ethical terms and categorises.

The following article is devoted to Jan Michał Witort (1853–1903), in his younger years a political activist and conspirator, whose patriotic activity resulted in two convictions: he was arrested in Vilnius in 1875 (after the trial he was exiled to Onega in Arkhangelsk Governorate), and again in Warsaw in 1879, fol-

lowing which he was exiled in 1880 to Mariinsk (Tomsk Governorate). Upon his return from exile, he decided to take up journalism. Witort also became involved in cultural research. Despite his lack of formal legal training, he had a vivid interest in this field – particularly in the area of common law, and devoted two

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monographs to its study: *Zarysy prawa zwyczajowego ludu litewskiego* (Introduction to the Common Law of the Lithuanian People; Witort 1898), *Zarysy prawa pierwotnego* (Introduction to Primary Law; Witort 1899). He is also the author of dozens of scientific papers published in eminent ethnographic periodicals.

Information on Witort is available from two primary sources: official documents (used mainly by historians) and autobiographical sources – an autobiography written in 1898 and published a century later (Witort 1997) and a somewhat earlier, unpublished memoir “Znad brzegów Morza Białego”¹ (From the Shores of the White Sea), where he reminisces on his experiences from the period of January 1875 to March 1, 1879.

My interest in the memoir is primarily as an account (or more specifically a much later reconstruction) of the author’s own attitude towards other cultures. It is primarily significant in the context of an analysis of the reasons that eventually steered him towards choosing ethnography as the area of his scientific activity. The work of a culture researcher is equally defined by professional expertise as it is by his or her specific approach – attitude towards other people. The memoir provides us with an insight into his reading choices and self-educational curriculum, as well as into what Witort himself perceived as important in his relationships with other people.

In 1866, Jan Michał Witort was sent to the military middle school in Polotsk on the river Daugava. In 1871, he moved to Vilnius where he prepared for his school leaving exams. The year also

marked his first involvement with socio-political activism. He passed his exams in 1872 at the real middle school in Vilnius, after which he enrolled, in the autumn of that year, at the chemical and technical department of Riga Polytechnikum. In his autobiography, Witort claims to have spent four semesters there (Witort 1997: 220), but based on the surviving documents of Riga Polytechnikum, Arkadiusz Janicki suggests that Witort’s studies in Riga lasted only from January until June 1874, as evidenced by his matriculation number: 671 (Janicki 2005: 22–26). During his time at the university, he collaborated with the Vilnius academic youth association and archival sources from that period include gendarmery reports of “suspicious travels” undertaken at the turn of 1873/74 to Petersburg, Warsaw, Riga and Daugavpils, as well as Grodno (Czerepica 1985: 49). In 1874, he proceeded to continue his studies at the Technological Institute in Petersburg but soon afterwards left for Vilnius; from this moment on, much of the available information comes from his autobiography (Witort 1997: 214–223). The subsequent events were also described in his memoir, where he gives a far more detailed account of his first incarceration and exile to Arkhangelsk Governorate. He arrived in Petersburg for his exams in early 1875 but returned home only a month later. A short time afterwards, he received a manufactured telegram informing him of his brother Cezariusz (a middle school student in Vilnius) having allegedly contracted a serious illness. As it later turned out, on the night of 9-10 February, his brother

had been arrested together with a group of other youngsters (Wawrykowa 1963: 338–340). Soon, Witort himself was also arrested at the European Hotel in Vilnius (his apartment had been searched in the presence of a prosecutor) and incarcerated, together with a group of colleagues, at the local political prison. The investigation continued until early March, in May the prisoners were informed of the ruling of the Central Vilnius Political Committee which condemned those found guilty of more grievous transgressions to exile and those charged with lesser crimes to imprisonment; Witort was sentenced to forced relocation to Onega (currently Arkhangelsk Oblast).

Witort was not a stranger to travel even before his exile (as a middle school and university student), having visited many places distant from his family home and marked with their own, local specificity: Polotsk, Riga, Petersburg; but his internment and the subsequent exile undoubtedly constituted a significant turning point in his life, what Arnold van Gennep describes as his rites of passage. His first encounter with the gendarmery general Aleksandr Łosiew, the house search and first interrogations could be seen as a particular rite of separation, the several months spent in prison as the rite of transition, and the journey to his later exile as the rite of incorporation (Gennep 2004: 10–11). His imprisonment and exile would ultimately define his identity as a political prisoner, which had a long-lasting effect on his subsequent contacts with other people.

Scientific publications in English pertaining to the concept of humans (peo-

ple) in relation to other people tend to evoke the category of self-other, commonly used not only in culture studies but also e.g. in psychology, whereby ‘self’ and ‘other’ need not necessarily relate only to inter-group relations. In this article, I will be making references to that category (the meaning of ‘other’ is relatively close to Polish ‘inny’), but it is noteworthy that in the Polish tradition (among others) there is a long established, and somewhat different category of “*swój – obcy*” [kindred – alien]. Roughly translated, it could be said to correspond to the English self-other, but it is not entirely synonymous. The words *swój* (pronoun) and *obcy* (adjective) are both used here as nouns.

The category *swój-obcy* has a typological character² (which will prove important in the following deliberations) is not a neutral one – contrary to *self-other*. One who is seen as *swój* is evaluated positively, whereas *obcy* evokes unfamiliarity, possibly danger, an *obcy* is associated with something unexpected. Indeed, the quality of *obcość* (alienness) can be attributed to someone fairly well known but not particularly respected or liked. One who is *obcy* may, but does not necessarily have to be distinctly different. In the Polish language, calling someone *inny* (other) can in fact be perceived as a complement, whereas branding someone as *obcy* denotes a decidedly negative emotional distance.

Any attempt to descriptively approach this problem is fraught with difficulty for a number of reasons. The first, as already signalled in the quoted excerpt from Ewa Nowicka and Sławomir Łodziński’s text, is related to lexical in-

compatibilities between particular languages, and consequently the adoption of local, emic terminologies. In turn, this leads to an even more profound problem – scientific literature is written in national languages, which means that seemingly neutral terminology is in fact employed against a vivid context defined by specific etymology, prior usage, as well as the language's capacity for phraseology and metaphoric expression. And all of these aspects are virtually inseparable from specific emotional and evaluative frameworks, even if the same are predominantly subconscious. A good example of the above is provided by the critique of Julia Kristeva's *Étrangers à nous-mêmes* (Kristeva 1988) voiced by Bernhard Waldenfels in his *Topographie des Fremden: Studien zur Phänomenologie des Fremden* (Waldenfels 1997). While freely admitting that Kristeva's work was a source of considerable inspiration and offered a compelling portrayal of the sense of otherness, Waldenfels criticises the author for presenting a historically inconsistent depiction of the other by freely drawing upon a number of disciplines Kristeva's error (as perceived by Waldenfels) is that in her reflection the other assumes a variety of disparate characteristics, as well as that she resorts to using a whole range of inconsistent descriptions such as "alienness", "strangeness", "otherness" or even "difference" (Waldenfels 1997: 24–25). Kristeva associates the cultural origins of the phenomenon with the sociological perspective, wherein the other is defined from the intergroup standpoint as one who stands outside the group, thus au-

tomatically becoming the enemy. Any attempt to standardise cultural experience must, by necessity – given the ubiquity of cultural diversity – lead to simplification. However, an analysis of multiple endonyms which commonly refer to "people", sometimes even "the real people", (cf. Birket-Smith 1965: 3, Popowska-Taborska 2004: 57–63) quickly reveals an underlying, intergroup dissonance, or even collectively formulated aversion towards other communities and their representatives. The sociology of the late 19th c. made attempts to explain the same by evoking the self-preservation instinct (combined with the paradigm of collective struggle for survival) and unity of primary groups (cf. Benedyktowicz 2000: 38).

I appreciate Waldenfels's intention – the desire to standardise the "question of the other", to definitively categorise it and boil it down to a single, universal phenomenon. But at the same time, I am convinced that any attempt at such a description is bound to fail, not only because it must give precedence to certain concepts and perspectives (in this case European, or specifically German philosophy) over others, but also because it would, accordingly, be biased in favour of a certain language and its specific lexis, which would not so much communicate meaning but rather impose a comprehensive perception of the world.

I am acutely aware of these problems as I attempt to analyse a text written in 19th c. Polish, in an article intended for publication in Lithuania in the English language. I realise that certain emic meanings signalled by local lexis are vir-

tually impossible to translate, but to set them aside would mean to completely forego contextual taxonomy.

In order to account for Witort's attitude towards the people he came across during his exile to Arkhangelsk Governorate, I will have to resort to the use of three, rather than two terms (although even this will not allow for a truly comprehensive representation of the complexity of human interaction), namely: the **kindred**, the **alien** and the **other**. The terms themselves are not Witort's own, but a careful analysis of his text reveals three primary attitudes (of varying intensity) reflected in his descriptions of other people. "Kindred" will refer to people whom Witort held in high esteem, with whom he had warm and friendly relationships. The category of aliens is composed of people whom Witort held emotionally at bay on account of his negative perception of their actions, despite their being culturally (some of his Polish compatriots) or civilisationally (representatives of other European nations) akin to himself. Whereas the others are representatives of non-European cultures with whom Witort came in contact during his exile.

The notions of kindredness, alienness and otherness are near impossible to discuss in isolation from the spatial context in which they are experienced. When approaching the problem of alienness in our context, one must account for a place that is "separate" – geographically close but functionally far removed from the reality of "everyday" life, namely a political prison. The author depicts an experience which may have been familiar

to a certain group of individuals from his generation, but nonetheless remained unknown to a vast majority of the general public. The text provides details about the building's interior, the way the cells were furnished, the living conditions experienced by the inmates (including even a mention of the food rations). The description of Witort's time in prison makes us acutely aware of the problems inherent in an attempt to adopt the simple categorisation of the kindred and the alien. The text makes numerous references to the notions of honour and dignity. Witort's account does not elaborate on national issues – his interest lies not so much with the interactions between Poles and Russians, but rather between prisoners and representatives of the authorities. He emphasises in no uncertain terms that even in a situation as difficult as being incarcerated in a penitentiary institution, it is possible to preserve one's dignity. He appreciates the distanced attitude of the Russian prosecutor, Gustaw Pohl, and his evident respect for the law, which he juxtaposes with the conduct of the gendarmes who resorted to illegal means (albeit without threats or violence) in order to coerce the prisoners into admitting their guilt. Moreover, the author praises the integrity of the prison's warden – lieutenant Dorn, and his ability to resolve conflicts – even between the prisoners themselves: "I never heard any complaints about unkind behaviour or improper conduct, although we had plenty of reasons; irritated and suffering prisoners often looked for an excuse for a row, to vent their wrath, hatred, and anger. It

must be admitted that colonel Dorn's – the warden's – tactfulness and skill helped to eliminate many unpleasant conflicts and misunderstandings which could have ended seriously; for example, a gendarmerie officer was assaulted, but the case ended without consequences" (pp. 37–39).

In his accounts of conflicts, Witort does not exonerate his fellow-prisoners, nor does he place the blame solely on the members of the prison service (representatives of Russia and tsarism). Indeed, the description makes no actual reference to national matters whatsoever. Moreover, when reading these fragments, we are faced with a certain paradox – on the one hand, Witort (as evidenced in his autobiography; Witort 1997: 220) was exasperated by the "pride and arrogance of the gentry", but on the other, a dominant criterion in his assessment of life situations evoked the notions of honour and dignity signifying that his worldview was grounded in the fundamental values of the ethos of knightly chivalry. He would continue to abide by these principles also during his time in exile.

The author gives a fairly detailed description of his time in exile, particularly with respect to the customs of the populations permanently or temporarily inhabiting the European part of the northern Russia: the Pomors, the Sami people fairly recently resettled there by the Russians, as well as the people living with their families on the shores of the White Sea but originating from other, distant regions and still cultivating their native traditions – the English and representatives of other nations; and last but not

least the temporary residents of the area (usually staying only for several years at a time) – political and criminal exiles. The author provides the reader with the descriptions of the groups themselves (their customs and traditions) and of the relations observed between them. He views all of them from a polite distance. His point of reference is provided by political convicts – both Polish and Russian; he reminisces with particular fondness on the already mentioned Berwi-Flerowski and Tatiana Ch., whom he revered for their honesty, education and ethical conduct. The group of exiles also included a number of blue-collar workers, some of whom Witort also described with considerable appreciation.

Witort was weary of people whose conduct he deemed as unethical – even if they too were exiles and considered themselves to be Polish. For instance, this is what he wrote about a certain Niedźwiedzki whom he came across in Arkhangelsk: "he was Polish but so degenerated that it was hardly possible to even have a conversation with him in Polish; we later found out that he a considerable disrepute, none of the other exiles wished to have anything to do with him due to his numerous ethical transgressions. We were nonetheless pleased to make his acquaintance, but remained vigilant in his presence" (pp. 149–151).

He was very fond of the English population and left accounts of several encounters with its members. When it came to Russians – civil servants and representatives of the authorities, his attitude varied on a case-by-case basis. He respected those he perceived as decent

and honest, but had only disdain and contempt for the others. His perception of criminal exiles and Orthodox clergy was very negative, but he had considerable respect for monks living in the nearby Orthodox monasteries.

He prefers those who declare their dislike for the czarism and the Orthodox Church – e.g. Bazyli Korczażyński (p. 223), or “the so-called Pomors, Ras-kolniks, familiar with the life of Norwegian peasants, who have no warm feelings towards the czar, or towards official Russia, and who greatly despise the Orthodox Church” (p. 207). The Pomors were respected by Witort because of their attitude: “the Police were very considerate and kind to people: no abuse or back talk was known, because the proud, independent Pomor, who knew something about foreign relations, could defend their human dignity” (pp. 253–255).

When it comes to the customs of the “urban population” of Onega, his attitude can be described as neutral, he observes that: “the people cling to many relics of the past long gone, not only in terms of customs and traditions, but also in their language and folk tales. We still come across traces of primitive sexual freedom” (pp. 293). His description of the Sami village (located in the vicinity of Kandalaksha) and the ritual of “appeasing” a hunted bear is rather matter-of-fact and somewhat dry, possibly due to the shortage of time, of which he repeatedly complained (pp. 423–431).

Witort observes the local customs and the effects of cultural changes brought about by the English and the Norwegians (whom he values greatly), but also

by contacts with criminal exiles (who “afflict the cities with moral pestilence and decay”; p. 303).

The memoir conveys two models of portraying people whom Witort came across in the Far North – those he qualifies as representatives of European civilisation are generally evaluated individually³ and in strict ethical terms (if perceived in a negative light, they are treated with derision and consequently branded as **aliens**, whereas a positive assessment qualifies them as **kindred souls**), while representatives of other civilisations tend to be described collectively and in a non-evaluative manner – from polite distance. The later could be categorised as **others**.

When summing up his exile, Witort states: “the diligent intellectual work finally transformed me into a follower of positive philosophy; the doctrine of evolutionism deeply impressed my mind and my heart, and I became its supporter, applying it to Social Science and Ethics; then, I understood well that today’s social forms are transitional, relative, in short – historical categories” (pp. 485–487). However, the cultural relativism was not ethical relativism – an awareness of historicity of standards did not undermine the feeling of alienation towards those whose conduct was immoral.

The time spent by the author in the European part of the northern Russia provided ample opportunity for ethnographic study – the ‘others’ seemed to be close at hand. However, it was still too early for auto-ethnography understood as a depiction of one’s own community (Hayano 1979), whereby the aliens could have a chance to become the others.

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Endnotes

¹ I am using the manuscript: Jan Witort, *Znad brzegów Morza Białego (From the Shores of the White Sea)*, Library of the Ossoliński National Institute in Wrocław, cat. no. 7246, pp. 1–493; every quotation and detailed analysis is followed by a reference page number; the manuscript pages are only written on one side so the document includes only odd numbered pages.

² This refers to the fact that between the extreme notions of kindredness and alienness, there are also fluid intermediate values.

³ Sporadically, he did generalise when writing e.g. about junior Russian civil servants (pp. 213–215) or criminal exiles (pp. 303–305).