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Annihilation or Revival?

On the Binary Topos “barbaric vs. civilized” in Russian and Polish Poetry at the Beginning of the 20th Century*

Dating back to ancient Greece, the classic dichotomy of “barbaric vs. civilized” has become a multifunctional topos in European languages and cultures. Constructing a binary between the “self” and the “other,” the term denotes differences between individuals, nations, races, religions, and even aesthetics. As such, this topical binary may be conceived as a rhetorical device and (depending on the given perspective of a person, group or culture) it can always be reactivated, reconstructed, and accommodated to shifting conditions. In the process of marking “the other” as a different individual, or a different ethnic group or class, all “othering” categorizations simultaneously construct the identity of the “self,” who assumes a position of superiority vis-a-vis the “other.” Such “othering” strategies in defining or constructing subaltern identities have become prime targets of critical discussions in postcolonial studies and have generated projects of “re-writing” the identities and (hi-)stories of the oppressed and marginalized.

In this paper, I will describe two mutually interacting fields in which the topos “barbaric vs. civilized” is constructed and functionalized: in the political, where the lines are drawn between nations and civilizations, and in the aesthetic,

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where the lines are drawn between groups or literary periods in a single culture. The political and aesthetic functions of the binary topos are not mutually exclusive in the works of any author or group, but they may co-exist synchronically or intermittently. I will outline this process by analyzing a few examples from the poetry of Russian symbolism and Polish modernism. As a first example, I shall look at the discussions among Russian symbolist poets of the classical modernist period, who addressed an assumption based on deeply ingrained convictions held by members of their contemporary intelligentsia, i.e. that they had reached and even surpassed the peak of contemporary civilization and were now approaching its demise. The expectation of the unavoidable apocalypse of existing culture became a central topos in symbolist creativity, and it generated numerous variations of the theme. One of them is the motif of the downfall of an advanced civilization through the onslaught of a barbaric people. This motif will be analyzed in its fluctuation between political and aesthetic functions, thus using it as an example for the construction of the binary between “barbaric” vs. “civilized” peoples in the works of Valerij Brjusov and Aleksandr Blok. By mentioning the Skythians, the Huns and the Mongols, both poets evoke the memories of equestrian nomadic peoples, whom European cultures had traditionally conceptualized as barbarians. Central to my analysis are two well-known and often discussed poems by the Russian symbolists Valerij Brjusov and Aleksandr Blok, which were written between 1899 and 1918, and which both construct the binary “barbaric vs. civilized” in an aesthetic, respectively a political context. Following that, I will contrast Blok’s self-construction of Russia as “antemurale Europae” with the Polish traditional self-conceptualization as “antemurale christianitatis.”

Valerij Jakovlevič Brjusov (1873-1924) shared a conviction, which was then widely held by the Russian intelligentsia, that the existing Russian and European civilization was doomed to end and would soon perish in a cataclysm.¹ The motif of the barbarian appeared rather early in his poetry, even before 1900 (Koreckaja 180). At the time, he used it exclusively in an aesthetic context without any reference to a war of civilizations. In the poem “Skify” (1899,

¹ Brjusov depicted his idea of a perfect world of art (Langer 1990: 39-73) and his expectation of the coming destruction of the existing civilization in numerous poems, tales and dramas—e.g., those of the volume *Zemnaja Os’* (Langer 112-120).

“The Skythians”), for example, the persona imagines his metamorphosis into a *drevnij skif* (ancient Skythian), who recommends himself to “his people” by his prowess as a horseman, a hunter, and a warrior. He is not only accepted by the Skythians as their “son,” but also, by their priests (*volchvy*), as one of them (Brjusov, vol. 1: 152f.). By naming and addressing the barbaric Skythians as his own ancestors and contemporaries, the persona identifies with them. He conceptualizes them (and himself) as *vol’nye volki* (“free wolves”), who roam the wide spaces of the steppe in unlimited freedom, and whose priests and singers possess the power to perform two roles simultaneously: that of a member of the elitist group of spiritual leaders, and that of hunter, warrior and lover. The Skythian barbarian is here given as the idealized model of a poet’s and a male’s all-encompassing self-realization²; and the Skythians are constructed as part of the persona’s own past and origin. Sixteen years later, in the midst of the Second World War, Brjusov further extended the motif of the Skythians as ancestors of the Russians. His poem “My – Skify” (“We—the Skythians”) presents them as the historical embodiment of the barbarians, who raided the ancient world from their strongholds in the steppes “like demons” (*kak demony*) and destroyed it (Brjusov, vol. 2: 248f.). Their life is described as an existence in a state of permanent ecstasy, based on war, blood, riding, drunkenness, dancing, and singing, and their strength is constantly revived by their “true friend and teacher,” the “barley-wine” (*jačmennoe vino*, Brjusov, vol. 2: 248). In this ecstatic warrior culture, art is ascribed only a marginal function.

In 1906, Brjusov published his best volume of poems, *Stephanos* (Siwczyk-Lammers 99), which contained “Grjaduščie gunny” (“The On-coming Huns”). Here, the change from the Skythians to the Huns points to a new orientation in Brjusov’s conceptualization of the “barbaric vs. civilized”-binary: while the historical Skythians dominated the space of the later Russian Empire in pre-Christian times, and hence may be imagined as ancestors, the Huns, by contrast, came to Europe from Asia in the fourth century A.D., and they are therefore connected with a threat to Christian Europe and are conceived as its opponents. Until then, the Russian symbolists had lived purely for their art, in almost total

² In the same year, 1899, Konstantin Bal’mont published a poem by the same title “Skify,” where he depicted the Skythians in a similar way as embodiments of an unlimited desire for freedom and constant change (Bal’mont 103).

detachment from the everyday-world around them, but the volume *Stephanos* reflects two contemporary incidents of great importance, which changed profoundly the symbolists' attitude to their surroundings: The Russian-Japanese war of 1904-1905, and the first Russian revolution of 1905.³ The year 1905 marks not only a turning point in Russian history, but also in the creations of the symbolists. They began to turn to the conditions and circumstances of social and political reality. In the central cycle of *Stephanos*, "Sovremennost" ("The present time"), Brjusov reflects upon the development of the Russian-Japanese war in a series of nine poems. They document the persona's reactions: from his initially patriotic euphoria to his increasing disillusionment with, and then outright horror of, the Russian defeat and the atrocities of war.⁴ Some of the poems deal with the immediate reactions of a contemporary witness, while others reflect the events retrospectively. Another group of nine poems in the cycle depicts the revolution of 1905. Among them is the aforementioned poem "Grjaduščie gunny," which utilizes the opposition between barbarism and culture by evoking the impending ruin of European civilization from the onslaught of Asian barbaric people (Koreckaja 177-191). Here, as before, the apocalypse is pictured as part of a cyclically progressing course in the history of alternating cultures.

The poem is fashioned as the monologue of a persona, who, as a member of the old civilization, turns to the barbarians—the Huns—and invites them to begin their onslaught on Europe: They are asked to raid culture's "decrepit body" and to revitalize it in a "wave of flaming blood" (*Оживить одряхлевшее тело / Волной пылающей крови*, Brjusov, vol. 1: 433⁵), to level towns and palaces to the ground, to burn books and to desecrate temples. Destruction is linked to the myth of the life-giving strength of blood, and thus to renewal. Based on Brjusov's esoteric beliefs, this picture corresponds to his idea of the cyclical succession of civilizations, their blossoming and their decay, in the course of mankind's history. The persona's vision of the imminent destruction

³ For more detailed information on the history of the cycle, its publication and reception and on its political background see Siwczyk-Lammers 76-82.

⁴ For more detailed information on the iconography and symbolism of this volume see Siwczyk-Lammers 91-98.

⁵ This applies to all citations from the poem.

of civilization is encoded in reiterating imperatives given to the expected conquerors: *На нас . . . Рухните* (“Pounce . . . upon us”), *Поставъте . . . шалаши у дворцов* (“Set up . . . your tents at the palaces”), *Сложите книги кострами* (“Erect pyres out of books”), *Творите мерзостъ во храме* (“Desecrate the temples”). The imperative mode also dominates the epigraph at the top of the poem—*Топчи их рай, Аттила* (“Trample down their paradise, Attila”), a citation, taken from Vjačeslav Ivanov’s poem “Коѣвники красоты” (1904) (Ivanov, vol. 1: 188f.). But whereas Vjačeslav Ivanov’s poem had addressed the artists in their role as the “nomads of beauty,” who explode the narrow confines of petit-bourgeois everyday-life, thus anticipating the aesthetic renewal expected from the so-called “barbarians,” Brjusov is concerned about a total destruction of the existing material and intellectual civilization. Brjusov’s persona uses the personal pronoun “us,” and thereby presents himself in a victim position as one of those to be vanquished, but at the same time he identifies with the victimizers by summoning the “intoxicated horde” (*ордой опьянелой*) of Huns to devastate his own civilization. However, when the persona in an act of carnivalesque interprets the blood spilt by the Huns as a renewal of culture, their barbaric drunkenness is turned into Dionysiac ecstasy. A similarly carnivalesque trope is used in the request to transform the throne room into a “merry acre” (*veseloe pole*), in suggesting a restoration of fertility in a previously infertile ground, and in exulting in the barbarians’ victory. The persona celebrates the burning of books in the bonfires and the desecration of temples as the deeds of “innocent children” (*Вы во всем неповинны, как дети!* 433). In the persona’s mind the Huns thus become the longed for Barbarians, who are at once merry and wild, naïvely “innocent” and untouched by civilization, but destined to deliver the death-blow to old European culture, and thereby providing the chance for its renewal.

The persona himself belongs to the old civilization which is threatened by destruction, but he distances himself from the masses of ordinary people and, as a prophet and visionary, he identifies with the elitist group of “sages and poets” (*мудрецы и поэты*), as the “guardians of sacraments and faith” (*Хранители тайны и веры*). At the approach of the Barbarians this elite will withdraw into caverns, catacombs and deserts to guard the “burning lights of knowledge,” and, as so often in his work, Brjusov here uses a metaphor, which

goes back to esoteric topoi of arcane knowledge.⁶ The future of these “sages” and of the secrets they guard is left open; the persona is unable to answer the question if their “testamentary works” (*заветны[е] творени[я]*) will vanish without a trace, or if they will be preserved. The persona ends his monologue by announcing the intention to welcome the Barbarians (and thus his own destruction) with a hymn.

Brjusov transforms the idea of civilization’s aesthetic renewal through the bewildering and liberating effects of innovative and free art, into the historiosophical notion of the downfall of mankind’s historical cultures through the onslaught of Barbarians. At the end of the 19th century “civilization” as a term here designates not only national Russian culture, but it includes European, respectively Occidental culture in its entirety, predicting that Russia as an integral part of this civilization, will fall victim to the new Huns from the farther East. Brjusov’s approach to the “barbaric vs. civilized”-binary is representative for many of the Russian symbolists. Similar changes from the aesthetic to the political (and vice versa) functionalizing of the topos are found in the works of e.g. Vladimir Solov’ev, Dmitrij Merežkovskij und Vjačeslav Ivanov.

The overthrow of the tsarist state and society in the revolutionary year 1917 was read by most of the Russian intelligentsia as a confirmation of their conviction that the ruin of the old society was necessary. Brjusov was one of the first Russian writers who openly declared themselves in favour of the Soviet regime; he even became a member of the Communist Party of Russia—a singular case among the non-emigrated symbolists (Siwczyk-Lammers 41). Aleksandr Blok’s reaction to the revolution was more ambiguous: Like Brjusov, he was convinced of the necessary destruction of the existing order, but at the same time he experienced the chaos of revolution and civil war as very distressing, and he was often filled with horror at the outrages of his time. His long poem “The Twelve” (“Dvenadcat,” 1918) has Jesus Christ being in command of a platoon of twelve Red Army soldiers on night patrol in the deserted streets of Petrograd, but they are depicted as wanton murderers and plunderers nonetheless.

⁶ See for example, Brjusov’s cycle of sonnets *Torches of Thought* (*Svetoč mysli*, 1918) where he presents the succession of human civilizations as a passing on of the “torch of thought”; Brjusov, vol. 4: 383-389.

In his poem “The Skythians” (“Skify”), which was written during his work on “The Twelve,” Blok depicts the relation of Russia to Europe and Asia in a new way. The poem was produced in a period, when Blok was in close contact with a group of poets and critics, who in 1917 and 1918 edited two volumes under the title “The Skythians.”⁷ The group was named after this emblematic title, and its members were poets like Andrej Belyj, Sergej Esenin and Nikolaj Kljuev, the journalist and publisher D. Mstislavskij (Maslovskij) and the critic R. V. Ivanov-Razumnik. The “Skify” propagated the idea of “spiritual maximalism” (*duchovnyj maksimalizm*), and they advocated an “eternal revolution” and a life spent in the “holy madness” (*святое безумие*) of spiritual search (Blok, vol.5: 462). They rejected reforms and compromises, as well as sobriety and reason. Their books combine reflections on the given crisis of civilization with a trust in the higher purpose for the historical upheavals of 1917, and faith in the messianic mission of Russia in the world. As they compared unfavourably the cold, rationalistic and technocratic civilization of Europe with the young Russia searching for social justice and a spiritual absolute, they continued and transformed the old 19th century celebratory and ethnocentric discourse of Slavonic cultural exceptionalism, regarding the relationship between Russia and Europe. In the 19th century Aleksandr Gercen had already described the future role of Russia in Europe as the “new coming of barbarians” (*novoe prišestvie varvarov*), as the campaign of untamed youth, driven by unbridled force against the old world. In his articles, Ivanov-Razumnik summarized the old discussions and gave them a new focus: The “Skythians” contrasted the expected downfall of old, soulless Europe with the great future awaiting the young Russian civilization, the “light from the East.” The poets understood the political revolution of 1917 as a prologue to a new revolution of the spirit, as a historical divide, which would mark the beginning of a third era of human history after the paganism of classical antiquity and the Christianity of Europe, and they talked about the necessity to develop a new human, a new value system, and a new faith. Their ideas show strong affinities with the Soviet discourse on the creation of a new human, and a new Socialist society, but in developing their theories,

⁷ A third volume, which would contain among others Blok’s “Skify” and “Dvenadcat” could not be realized any more.

both groups—the Soviets as well as the “Skythians”—exhibit a fundamentally Eurocentric view of the evolution of human civilizations.

After Blok had grown more closely acquainted with Ivanov-Razumnik in 1914, he grew more and more concerned about the problem of the crisis of European and Russian civilization and the necessity of its renewal. In the preface to the first volume of “Skify” (1917) the Skythians are celebrated as the bearers of an invigorating and rebellious maximalism. As the incarnations of a healthy barbarianism they are contrasted with a sickly and sclerotic Europe. The volume also reprinted Brjusov’s aforementioned poem “My – Skify” (“We—the Skythians”) under the new title “Ancient Skythians” (“Drevnie Skify”).⁸ In recorded conversations with Ivanov-Razumnik Blok criticized the inclusion of this poem as not fitting the contents and aims of this volume.⁹ Blok felt irritated by Brjusov’s portrayal of the Skythians as an ancient historic people, and he suggested that they had better be presented as contemporaries or at least as “eternal Skythians” (*večnye skify*; Blok, vol.5: 463), i.e. essentialized as eternal barbarians. In his own poem “Skify” Blok presents the name of these ancient horsemen to signify the contemporary Russian self-image.

Blok wrote the poem in the course of two days (January 29th to 30th, 1918), while he was working on the long poem “The Twelve” and on the paper “The Intelligentsia and the Revolution” (“Intelligencija i revoljucija”; Blok, vol.5: 470). The epigraph preceding “The Skythians” is taken from Vladimir Solov’ev’s poem “Panmongolizm” (“Pan-Mongolianism,” 1894), which followed contemporary archaeological assumptions and presented the Skythians as a Mongolian people, appropriating their name as a synonym for the role of Russians in Europe. The slightly altered epigraph reads: *Панмонголизм! Хотя имя дико / Но нам ласкает слух оно . . .* (“Panmogolism! However strange the name, / But it flatters our ears”).¹⁰ Blok then utilizes this self-image of Russians as Skythians to address Europe in a poem consisting of 19 quatrains,

⁸ Brjusov had initially thought of publishing the poem in the volume *Devjataja Kamena*, which could not be realized in the end. Many of the poems designed for that volume were edited in newspapers and almanacs during the lifetime of the author. The volume was finally reconstructed and published in 1973 (Brjusov, vol. 2: 248f.).

⁹ Choosing for the group the ethnonym “Skify” points to the actuality of the discussions on the crisis of contemporary culture in its Russian context see Langer 74-217.

¹⁰ Solov’ev’s second line is: “Но мне ласкает слух оно,” Соловьев 104.

in which the persona's monologue reiterates the binary "you, the Europeans" vs. "we, the Skythians." Thus, the persona presents himself as the speaker of the nation, who argues against an-"other" antagonistic collective. His initial argument to affirm the superiority of Russia over Europe rests on demographic quantity. It is enlisted in the very first verse of the poem: *Мильоны – вас. Нас – тьмы, и тьмы, и тьмы* ("You are millions. We are—vast numbers, vast numbers and vast numbers").¹¹ His second argument ironically adopts the European stereotype of Russians as Asians¹²: *Да, Скифы – мы! Да, азиаты – мы, – / С раскосыми и жадными очами!* ("Yes, we are Skythians! Yes, we are Asians, / With greedy slitted eyes!"; 77). His identification of Russians as Asians is then revoked in the following quatrains where the Russians are depicted as inhabiting the borderlands between Europe and Asia: The Russians had for centuries formed a bastion between the hostile races of Mongolians and Europeans, and had thus secured the safety of the continent and facilitated its unhindered cultural development. Europe, however, had failed to acknowledge the Russian self-sacrifice, but had exploited Russia and had seen it as an object of colonial desires and anticipated wars of conquest. But now the persona sees the end of Europe to have come: *Вот – срок настал. Крылами бьет беда, / И каждый день обиды множит, / И день придет – не будет и следа / От ваших Пестумов, быть может!* ("Now the time has come. Disaster flaps its wings, / And every creature breeds insults. / And the day will come—when there will not be left a trace of your Paestum, possibly!"; 77). But the threat to Europe's ancient civilization is followed by a conciliatory gesture. With a reference to the Paestum of classical antiquity, the sixth quatrain urges Europe to remember the wisdom of Oedipus and to solve the riddle of the Russian Sphinx: Russia the enigmatic Sphinx is depicted as a monster, filled with a love-hate for/against Europe, threatening to break the "frail bones" of Europe in the powerful embrace of its paws. At the same time however, Russia is pictured as the embodiment and store-room of European cultural memory: in contrast to Europe, which neither knows nor respects Russia, Russians are familiar with European civilization. They were educated by Europe and are familiar with

¹¹ Blok, "Skify," 1999, 77-80; here: 77. This applies to all citations from the text.

¹² For information about the displacement of Russia from the North to the East of the imaginary map of Europe see Lemberg.

French esprit and German genius, they remember Paris, Venice, lemon groves and Cologne cathedral. Russia has two faces, a European and an Asian one, which it can opt to turn to friend or foe respectively. The threat of an embrace by this sphinx-like Russia ends with an offering of peace—albeit contingent on Europe’s capitulation:

Придите к нам! От ужасов войны
Придите в мирные объятия!
Пока не поздно – старый меч в ножны,
Товарищи! Мы станем – братья! (79)

Come to us! From the horrors of war
Come into our peaceful embraces!
Even now it’s not too late—the old sword into the sheath,
Comrades! We will become—brothers!

And again, the offer is followed by another threat. In case that the Europeans are not ready for peace, the Russians will present them their Asian faces (*Мы обернемся к вам / Своею азиатской рожей!*, “We will turn on to you / Our Asian trap!”; 79) and suggest the Ural mountains as the site for the last battle between the European “steel-machines” (*Стальных машин*; 79) and the “wild Mongolian horde” (*С монгольской дикою ордою*; 79). The Europeans will have to fight this battle against the Mongolians all by themselves, however, because the Russians will stand aside and watch them through their “slit eyes” (*узкими глазами*; 79). This time they will not intervene, not even if the (*sic!*) Mongol, who is now addressed as a “cruel hun” (*свирепый Гунн*; 80), is mutilating the corpses, ravaging the towns and using churches as stables. The concluding quatrain condenses and repeats both threat and offer for a last time:

В последний раз – опомнись, старый мир!
На братский пир труда и мира
В последний раз – на светлый братский пир
Сзывает варварская лира! (80)

For the last time—come to your senses, old world!
To the brotherly feast of work and peace
For the last time—to the bright brotherly feast
The barbaric lyra is calling!

In this poem, Aleksandr Blok uses the names of Skythian, Asian, Mongolian and Hun as synonyms, the core of which he finally translates into “Barbaric.” He construes the Russians as Barbarians on the one side, and as the bearers and preservers of European civilization on the other. In turning against Europe, and in accepting the European definition of Russians as Asian Barbarians, he draws a dividing line between Russia and Europe. Concomitantly, he also draws a dividing line between Russians and Asians—the Russians will not take part in the annihilation of European civilization, but they will not prevent it either.

As mentioned before, Blok’s poem “Skify” was written at the end of January 1918, and it expresses an immediate emotional reaction to the impending break down of the Bolsheviks’ peace negotiations with Germany. While the leaders of the Bolshevik Party propagated a peace without annexations, Germany demanded high territorial requisitions of Russian lands as the price for a premature conclusion of peace. Due to the disintegration of the Russian Army after the Revolution, the Bolsheviks were hardly in a position to reject these conditions, but despite of the war-weariness of the Russian people these conditions gave rise to outraged protests (Hildermeier 127-129).¹³ Blok’s poem takes an immediate stand in these political developments. It employs a Russian self-image, which takes up the European stereotype of Russia as a half-Asian country and turns it against its propagators. It is due to the heat of the contemporary discussion; politically, it can be read as a statement from the perspective of a formerly great power, which has lost its clout, made to a neighbour and former partner who seems suddenly superior. Shortly after, Blok rejected the poem as tendentious, and he no longer wanted to acknowledge it as part of his oeuvre (Blok 476).

When in this poem Blok construes Russia as the “bulwark of Europe” against Asia, he returns to the centuries old concept of “*antemurale christianitatis*” (Tazbir 21-30; Morawiec 250). Depending on their concrete geographic and geopolitical positions, various European countries were identified with this concept of a country on the border of two worlds, and they were named accordingly:

¹³ At the beginning of March, 1918, the leaders of the Bolshevik party declared a one-sided peace without determining the borders to their Western neighbours.

So wurden etwa die Staaten der gegen die Osmanen gerichteten „Heiligen Liga“ wie das Heilige Römische Reich, Venedig und Spanien als eine solche Vormauer der Christenheit angesehen. Die Erinnerung an die Schlacht auf dem Kulikovo-Pol'e von 1380, in der Dmitrij Donskoj den ersten großen Sieg des aufstrebenden Moskauer Reiches über die Tataren errang, und an die (verlorene) Schlacht der Serben auf dem Amsfeld im Jahre 1389 sowie das Bild von der Rolle Finnlands als Bollwerk gegen den Kommunismus in den 1930er Jahren sind Ergebnis von antemurale-Vorstellungen, die in bestimmten Situationen zitiert werden, um die Bedeutung des Volkes, des Staates bzw. Ereignisses für die Gemeinschaft, zu der es sich zugehörig erklären will, herauszuheben. (Hein-Kircher 129)

In central and eastern Europe the term “antemurale christianitatis” was associated predominantly with Poland, where it was particularly popular. Poland had claimed the recognition and status of “antemurale” as early as the end of the Middle Ages, when the title signified the bulwark against the Ottoman Empire. At the same time the title also served a pragmatic political function, and the status of “antemurale christianitatis” entailed concrete political and financial support from European neighbours and especially from the Vatican. In turn, the pope and the central European kingdoms regarded the defence of the borders against the Ottomans as Poland’s duty, and they repeatedly reprimanded Polish kings to fulfill this function correctly. By the turn to the 17th century the Polish interpretation of “antemurale christianitatis” was extended to that of serving as a bastion also against the rising power of Moscovia, which was perceived as a schismatic culture (Hein-Kircher 133). Now, the concept covered not only the defense against a non-Christian enemy from outside of Europe, but it also served to demarcate dividing lines within the Christian world. Poland in turn began to define herself as a barrier against European contacts with Moscovia, and acted politically on that premise (Morawiec 253). In the 18th century, when the Ottoman Empire as well as the Polish Rzeczpospolita lost their formerly powerful position, and when simultaneously Prussia and Russia emerged as the new powers in eastern and central Europe, the status of antemurale lost its pragmatic function, and the concept shifted from the religious-political field to that of myth. It moved semantically towards signifying a “bulwark of civilization” against the Barbarians in the East. From the Polish point of view, the Russians were looked upon as a Barbaric and Byzantine-Asian people of the Orient, who did not belong to the catholic civilization of the Occident. This

concept was propagated most forcefully in the context of 19th century nationalism, as well as by the shift of the European cultural center to the middle of the continent, entailing Russia's (and Poland's) displacement in the mental map of Europe from North to East. But the notion of a superiority of Polish culture over Russia was conserved in Polish thought and made the annihilation of their state by the division 1795 especially painful and grievous (Lemberg 74-77). Then, in the second half of the 19th century, Bismarck's policy of suppressing the Catholic church and the Polish language as the guardians of Polish identity in the occupied regions, expanded the semantics of *antemurale* to include the concept of a people living in an interspace between two equally hostile barbaric powers (Hein-Kircher 133f.). Depending upon the perspective of the special group, Poland now was construed either as the bulwark of freedom and culture against the Barbarism of Russian despotism, or, by boosting and transforming the Russian enthusiasm for Slavonic cultures and pan-Slavic ideas, as a bastion of Slavic spiritual culture against European rationalism and industrialization (Morawiec 256f). In this variant of the notion, Poland became a part of a Slavic *antemurale* against Western European civilization, and in the years following the First World war the concept of "antemurale" gained an additional dimension, and a renewed actuality, when the Polish state was re-erected and then campaigned for a clearer demarcation of its ill-defined Eastern borders with Bolshevik Russia: Poland then began to interpret herself as an *antemurale* of European civilization, freedom, and democracy against Bolshevik Barbarianism and despotism (Tazbir 178; Hein-Kircher 138f.).

In the period between the First and the Second World War, a series of essays, articles and poetic texts were published, which continued the discourse of "antemurale" in the context of Poland's new role in Europe (Tazbir 164-177). In 1908, in his story "Zemsta" ("Vengeance"), Bolesław Prus had still pleaded for the option which had dominated the discourse in the second half of the 19th century, i.e. to lay at rest the concept of Poland as an "antemurale" guarding European civilization, and to relinquish the idea of an armed rebellion against the dividing powers; thus, he opted for a strategy of regaining national sovereignty through what he called "organic work," i. e. by developing land and people through reforms and negotiations in order to prove their maturity. Ten years later, Stefan Żeromski in his prose poem "Wiatr od morza" ("Wind from

the Sea”; written 1917, published 1918) resurrected the concept of “antemurale” as a historical myth: Poland had defended Europe’s freedom and well-being against Barbaric onslaughts for centuries, but at the cost of falling behind economically and culturally, whereas whenever Poland herself had conducted wars of conquest of her own, she had done so purely as the agent of a civilizing mission. Reprinted frequently, Żeromski’s prose poem was adopted into the national school curricula and coined the image of Poland as the self-sacrificing “knight of Europe,” which soon became an overarching topos (Tazbir 174). The Polish victory over the Red Army at Warsaw in 1920 was interpreted as the “miracle at the Vistula,” saving not only Poland, but all of Europe from Bolshevism. Thus Poland was seen as continuing the function as defender of Europe against the East, and this interpretation of the victory served further to consolidate the myth of antemurale.

Demarcating one’s nation against a neighbouring culture is always, and simultaneously, an act of self-identification and of re-defining one’s own culture. Poland, by defining herself as Europe’s bulwark against Russia, positioned herself as an inherent and representative part of European culture. This may be demonstrated by a few examples from Polish literary texts. When Ludwik Hieronim Morstin in “Oda na cześć kultury łacińskiej” (“Ode to the honour of Latin culture”) sings the praise of Italy, the latter becomes a synonym for the praise of Poland, which had internalized Latin culture: since the 16th century, the poem suggests, the Polish tongue articulates itself in Italian rhythm. Since then the colours and hills of Poland simulate those of Italy, where the Latin Gods had found their refuge, and where “the Latin race is in the blood of the people” (*we krwi narodu jest Latynów rasa*, Morstin 251). In his volume *Return to Europe (Powrót do Europy)*, 1931) Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz constructs a picture of Europe as the Polish homeland in a similar vein, and, seeing it from the perspective of a Polish European, he presents it as self-evident that Poland belongs to Europe; e.g., the poem “Europe” depicts the collective flight of Polish artists and writers from the narrow old continent into exotic fields, and it celebrates their eventual return to Poland, as arriving at their true homeland, the country of Mickiewicz. The poem traces a change from wanderlust to being homesick for Europe. Whereas the splendours of flowers blooming, colours shining and jewels glittering in the sunlight of the far South remain unfamiliarly exotic to

them, the returnees greet the shores of Europe as their old and dark, but familiar home. Besides texts like “Nostalgia for Italy” (“Tęsknota Italii”), which evokes the old Northern and central European longing for Italy, there is one poem addressed “To Russia.” The text relies exclusively on a series of questions which convey the persona’s ambivalent relationship to Russia—a part of which was the former homeland of the poet himself. The initial question structures the entire poem “What shall I say to you, o Russia?” (*O czym mam ci powiedzieć, o Rosjo?*), which then enumerates several aspects of the persona’s personal bonds with Russia, some of which are presented ambivalently as positive or negative, while others are clearly positive. First of all, the poem names Russian literature as a simultaneously attractive and repulsive bond—while the work of the “heavenly Puškin” attracts the persona, Dostoevkiĵ’s negative pictures of Polish people repels him. The beauty of Ukrainian nights and landscapes is attractive, and so is the music of Skrjabin, but it is so in an emotionally unsettling, sweetly exciting and painfully “gothic” way, which haunts and hurts the persona “like a non-healing wound, given by a poisoned knife” (*jak nożem zatrutym zadana nieuleczalna rana*). In the last verse, the sequence of questions culminates in a variation of the poem’s first, articulating the persona’s conflict between antithetical emotional relations with Russia: “Shall I tell you I hate you? Or shall I call you beloved one?” (*Mam ci rzec, że cię nienawidzę? Czy rzec, jesteś ukochana?*). Having grown up in Ukraine, which was then a part of the Russian empire, but having left it for the newly erected Polish Republic, Iwaszkiewicz avoids all direct allusions to actual historical and political contexts. He depicts the conflict between his emotional commitment to his homeland Ukraine, and his repulsion from Russia, as a personal and private one, while simultaneously presenting this conflict as the collective experience of the Polish people from the Ukrainian *kresy*.

When we compare the Polish relation to Europe, as presented by Żeromski, Morstin and Iwaszkiewicz, with the Russian relation, as depicted by Blok and Brjusov, it becomes quite evident that the Russian self-image is dominated by a certain strangeness vis-a-vis Europe and an insecurity about belonging to the continent: in the poem “Skify,” Aleksandr Blok talks about the Russians’ intimate knowledge of European culture and contrasts it to the Europeans’ ignorance about a Russia, which remains a sphinx to Europeans.

Blok draws an enigmatic Russia which puzzles Europe by its otherness, which harbours both Europe and Asia in its womb, and which can freely choose between behaving in a “civilized” way, which is ethnocentrically euphemized as familiar to Europeans, or in a strange, Barbaric way that is constructed and “othered” as Asian. In contrast, Morstin and Iwaszkiewicz present Poland as clearly and wholly European; Poland is defined as an integral, and inseparable part of European culture. Thus, the myth of “antemurale Europae” is presented by these neighbouring cultures from two opposing directions, in the Polish case from the inside of Europe, in the Russian case from an insecure position on the border with Asia.

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Summary

Dating back to ancient Greece the classic dichotomy of "barbaric vs. civilized" has become a multifunctional topos in European languages and cultures. Constructing a binary between the "self" and the "other", the term denotes differences between individuals, nations, races, religions, and even aesthetics. As such this topical binary may be conceived as a rhetorical device, and, depending on the given perspective of a person, group or culture, it can always be reactivated, reconstructed, and accommodated to shifting conditions. The paper describes two mutually interacting fields in which the

topos “barbaric vs. civilized” is constructed and functionalized: in the political, where the lines are drawn between nations and civilizations, and in the aesthetic, where the lines are drawn between groups or literary periods in a single culture. The political and aesthetic functions of the binary topos are not mutually exclusive in the works of any author or group, but they may co-exist synchronically or intermittently. The paper outlines this process by analyzing a few examples from the poetry of Russian symbolism (Brjusov, Blok) and Polish modernism (Morstin, Iwaszkiewicz).

Key words: comparative literature, “barbaric vs. civilized,” Russian poetry, Polish poetry, Valerij Brjusov, Aleksandr Blok, Ludwik Hieronim Morstin, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz

Zagłada czy odrodzenie? O toposie „barbarzyński/cywilizowany” w rosyjskiej i polskiej poezji początku XX wieku

Streszczenie

Sięgająca czasów starożytnej Grecji klasyczna dychotomia „barbarzyński/cywilizowany” stała się wielofunkcyjnym toposem w językach i kulturach europejskich. Termin ów, oparty na binarnej opozycji „Ja – Inny”, określa różnice, które dzielą poszczególne jednostki, narody, rasy, religie, a nawet estetyki. Dzięki swojej wielowymiarowości może być traktowany jako narzędzie retoryczne. W zależności od potrzeb danej osoby, grupy czy kultury może być reaktywowany, rekonstruowany i dostosowywany do zmieniających się warunków. Artykuł prezentuje dwa pola wzajemnych interakcji, na których jest budowany i funkcjonalizowany topos „barbarzyński/cywilizowany”: polityczne (gdzie dokonuje się podziałów pomiędzy narodami i cywilizacjami) oraz estetyczne (gdzie w danej kulturze wyróżnione zostają odrębne grupy artystyczne czy epoki literackie). Pojawiający się w pracach poszczególnych twórców czy grup binarny topos nie zawsze pełni wyłącznie polityczną bądź estetyczną funkcję – w niektórych utworach zaobserwować można ich częściowe lub pełne współistnienie. Artykuł przedstawia to zjawisko w oparciu o analizę rosyjskiej poezji symbolicznej (Brjusov, Blok) oraz polskiej poezji modernistycznej (Morstin, Iwaszkiewicz).

Słowa kluczowe: komparatystryka literacka, „barbarzyński/cywilizowany”, poezja rosyjska, poezja polska, Valerij Brjusov, Aleksandr Blok, Ludwik Hieronim Morstin, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz