

KATARZYNA CIEPLIŃSKA

University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn, Faculty of Humanities

ORCID: 0000-0003-4011-1429

Polish Rural Dialect and Culture of the Dobrzyń Region in Jerzy Pietrkiewicz's Novel *The Knotted Cord*¹

Abstract

During the first decades of the XX century the myth of idyllic pre-war countryside was strong in Poland and such reminiscences of the abandoned homeland were especially important for Polish exiles after The World War II. One of them was Jerzy Pietrkiewicz who described the Dobrzyń Land in his novel in English *The Knotted Cord*, published in Great Britain in 1953. A particularly interesting aspect of the book is the way the author incorporated the elements of the Polish rural dialect and culture into the book addressed to the British recipient. The aim of the article is to analyse the author's literary experiment based on the insertion of many Polish words into the English text. The main objective of the analysis is to view how Pietrkiewicz represented his homeland and identify the reasons why the book appeared to be successful.

Keywords: Jerzy Pietrkiewicz, *The Knotted Cord*, rural, folklore, dialect

The aim of the article is to present the elements of rural dialect and culture of the Dobrzyń Region in pre-war Poland in Jerzy Pietrkiewicz's novel *The Knotted Cord*. The author depicted the atmosphere of the village of Fabianki in an experimental way by inserting many Polish words into the English text. The main objective of the analysis is to view how Pietrkiewicz represented his homeland and identify the reasons why the book appeared to be successful.

In the post-war reality of many European countries, where food shortages were common (Tracy 1989, Millward 1992), the role of agriculture and its performance started growing rapidly (Williams

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1987) . Although in Britain the rural traditions were different than in Europe and the British peasantry diminished ‘under the wave of early agrarian capitalism’ (Hoggart *et al.* 1995: 186), nostalgic visions of the countryside remained strong (Abrahams 1991). Such sentiments were true of Austria and Switzerland, where ‘national policy has long sought to integrate human activities within a broad rural-environmental framework’ (Hoggart *et al.* 1995: 107). In France, Ireland or parts of western Germany rural traditions that exist derived from the peasantist past were cultivated (Hoggart *et al.* 1995: 188). Strong and stable rural communities lived according to principles of kinship, rights and obligations, mutual help, independence from the market economy, respecting the traditions, patriarchy and primogeniture. Such image of stability, strength and harmony dominated both popular and academic visions of the rural past (Arsenberg 1937), even though the idyllic picture was in reality often destroyed by harsh conditions, hunger and starvation (Shiel 1988: 15).

Such arcadian, pastoral myths remained the sources of rural nostalgia that in Britain functioned as the basis of “the role that the countryside played in national identity” (Short 1991: 34, Marsden *et al.* 1993) and constituted the very core of “definitions of Englishness” (Jeans 1990, Daniels 1993). The typical English countryside meant a mythological place where the unchanged values and national sentiments survived (Lowenthal 1991, Daniels 1993). Despite the fact that the English peasantry was gradually destroyed by commercial capitalism (Short 1991: 67), the countryside remained an important part of the nation’s heritage.

Strongly connected with the individual characters of rural communities are local dialects, remaining the integral parts of “the commonality myth” (Wolfram, Friday 1997: 143). They might be perceived as vital elements creating the group uniqueness. Yet, such linguistic diversities could be the source of severe difficulties for literary translators (Bonaffini 1997, Szymańska 2017, Al-Khanji 2020), often containing untranslatable elements (Sánchez 1991, Sánchez 1996, Floros 2016).

The myth of idyllic countryside was also strong in Poland and the reminiscences of the abandoned homeland were especially important for Polish exiles after World War II. One of them was Jerzy Pietrkiewicz, who described the Dobrzyń Land in his novel written in English *The Knotted Cord*. The folklore – songs, dances, customs, as well as the landscape of the region recalled in detail – form the colorful background of the novel’s action. The life of the village, although apparently realistic (this is the impression on the reader achieved by the accumulation of names and vivid descriptions of the hamlets), is saturated with magic and the narrator’s faith in the wisdom and strength of Polish peasants. A particularly interesting aspect of the book is the way the author incorporated the elements of the local rural dialect into the text.

Jerzy Pietrkiewicz (since 1958 Peterkiewicz) was born in 1916 in Fabianki, a small village in the region of Dobrzyń. After the beginning of the Second World War, he fled to Great Britain where he lived ever since until his death in 2007. Pietrkiewicz, as a young man, wrote poetry in Polish – mainly introducing such themes as peasant life, nature, patriotism and religion (Catholic connotations), all inspired by the so-called authentic movement in poetry created by Stanisław Czernik. With the outbreak of the World War II, he left Poland and in 1940 arrived in Great Britain knowing no English at all. Later he wrote in his autobiography: “How was I to cope with this demonic language which attacked my ears from every side in different lilts of accent and intonation?” (Peterkiewicz 1993: 168). Having studied at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, Pietrkiewicz soon became bilingual and bicultural. He continued studies in London where he wrote his thesis for doctorate in English literature and obtained the degree

as the first Pole in the history of King's College. Trying to assimilate to the new culture was a difficult process, but Pietrkiewicz appreciated how much knowing the English literary tradition broadened his horizons and accelerated the pace of his acculturation.

He believed that exile was more painful for a poet or a writer than for people of other professions, as "the native language which was previously the tool for him, through which he could create a bond with his audience and taste a kind of fame" was no longer needed and so the writer felt his "limitations whenever [...] denuded of language" (Peterkiewicz 1993: 161).

Writing in English seemed tempting, but also challenging. Slowly, but surely, the growing awareness made Pietrkiewicz believe that if he wanted to achieve success, he needed to shift into the adopted language. He wrote about it in his autobiography: "My own process of transformation continued with, and partly because of, the necessity to adapt to a new environment. I was shedding illusions" (Peterkiewicz 1993: 182). The work at university diminished his "sense of Not-belonging" (Peterkiewicz 1993: 220) and gave him academic experience.

The person who encouraged Jerzy to write the novel in English was his friend, Rosamond Bachelor. She was a Catholic born in India, knew Polish and Russian, and worked for a publishing house. She liked listening to Pietrkiewicz's stories of his childhood in Poland and, as they spoke English, he was proud of "being able to make [his] listener laugh, or to strike a note of tragedy to increase the tension" (Peterkiewicz 1993: 222). Finally she persuaded him to write a book, convincing him that since he had told it to her, it actually already existed. Looking for inspiration and trying to escape the depressing English climate, Pietrkiewicz went for a long holiday in Spain, where he finished writing the novel in 1951.

Rosamond arranged a meeting with the publisher, yet he did not accept the book for publication. In a letter to his wife, Christine Brooke-Rose, in January 1952, Pietrkiewicz wrote:

A few days ago Mr. Sheed² decided against publishing my novel, despite his wife's enthusiasm. I think he is simply frightened of the novel's implications (both in its religious and national background). He apparently suggested that I should make it a direct autobiography (of all unearthly and loathsome things!). (Pietrkiewicz 1952)

In 1953, the book appeared to be interesting for Alexander Stuart Frere, chairman of the board of William Heinemann Ltd., who agreed to publish it under one condition – the original title *Told from the Vernacular* had to be changed into *The Knotted Cord*.

Jerzy Pietrkiewicz wanted to re-create the atmosphere of pre-war village, the mythical place of his childhood. To somehow transfer the elements of rural dialect of the Dobrzyń region, the author wove Polish words, phrases and names into the text, mainly using language calques.

The characters in the book address each other with Polish "Pan" or "Pani", for example: "Keep on following pan Kowalski" or, in case of poor, landless peasantry: "Baba", "mother Ptak". The main hero, Bronek refers to his parents with Polish "mamo" and "tato". Numerous phrases are language calques, for example: "by Jesus and His Holy Mother", "cholera take you all" or "dog-blooded".

Many names and surnames occur, such as: Bronek, Antonina, Onufry, Florian, Suski, Galiski, Pniewski. In some names even the characteristic Polish clusters of consonants "sz" or "cz" are left unchanged, definitely unclear to the British reader in terms of pronunciation: in the diminutive

2 Francis Joseph Sheed – an Australian by origin, together with his wife, Maisie Ward who was British, in 1926 opened their own publishing house in London called „Sheed&Ward”. Currently, it is one of the most famous Catholic publishing houses in the world. It has published books by many recognized Catholic authors such as Gilbert K. Chesterton.

“Bronczek”, the surname “Oborowicz” or the horse’s name “Kasztan”. Only some names are changed into a version more familiar to the English reader: “Casimir” and “Stanislas”. Similarly, the geographical names of the region remain in their original spelling: Fabianki, Lipno, Rypin, Izbica, Kulin, Bogucin. Yet, Polish letters like “ń” do not appear and some names are slightly changed: New Helmica (Nowa Chelmica), Dobrin (Dobrzyń), Groden (Grodzień) or Torun.

As Catholic religion plays a vital role in the peasants’ lives, this is also reflected in the dialogues. The villagers often greet their neighbours saying “Jesus Christ be praised” or comment various situations with emotional exclamations like “By five wounds of Christ”, “Jesus and Mary!”, “Saint Joseph and Holy Mother of Skempe”. Catholic sanctuaries are mentioned, including “where Our Lady of the Sharp Gate dwells”.

What is typical of the pre-war rural areas, also in Fabianki, religion co-exists with magic, thus old pagan beliefs are strongly cultivated and respected. The people believe in special knowledge of healers and quacks who are more available and cheaper to visit than town doctors, so they are commonly asked for help in case of illness, more often than professional medicals. Simultaneously, the villagers are afraid of unnatural phenomena and supernatural abilities, some women are believed to be mischievous and powerful witches. It is commonly regarded to be true that such occultists may ruin other people’s lives by cursing or poisoning them with herbal mixtures: “She tried to leave a z mora Curse on you, poor girl”, “Ptak is an upior”, “szalej is a mad plant”.

Swearing is another characteristic element of the peasants’ everyday language. They easily get emotional and outwardly express their negative feelings (especially anger) in speech: “Cholera swallow all landlords and their brats”, “stupid old hag”, “you wry-mouthed, fat, braying donkey”. The dialogues are often arrogant in style, but it is obvious that some of the characters, especially those of the lowest social status in the village, are used to humiliating treatment, like in the conversation between pan Oborowicz and Baba:

Hey, Baba, has the devil’s horn pierced your bottom?

Oh, pan can joke, but pan’s little son saw the very foul person of a witch, this very day

The most offending language appears in the scene when a group of pilgrims called Mariawici³ walks through the village of Fabianki. The local peasants consider them to be heretics and express their hatred openly, abusing the sectarians: “They really pray to the Devil’s mother whore”, “you vile ungodly infidels”, “shameless offenders of the Holy Church” “the mother Whore’s and the Devil’s, her farting bastard fanatics”.

Other Polish elements in *The Knotted Cord* refer to national symbols and historical reminiscences. King Sigismund is mentioned as the monarch who established religious tolerance in the territory of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The bolsheviks are referred to as the enemies and uncultured barbarians whom the Poles bravely fought with during the war. Mother tells Bronczek about her eldest son,

3 In the monograph *The Third Adam* Jerzy Pietrkiewicz, using source documents, thoroughly described the rules of the Mariavite Church. He came to Poland in 1963 and interviewed many members of the sect. The church leaders were the excommunicated priest Jan Kowalski and the founder of the sect, mother Maria Kozłowska. The innovations introduced by Kowalski included, among other things, the creation of „mystical marriages” between priests and nuns. The children born of these unions were brought up in the Order. Another innovation by Kowalski was the priesthood of women, and then the possibility of obtaining priestly ordination by all of Mary’s followers.

Henryk, who “gave his life for the white eagle, fought the Bolsheviks and didn’t come back”. She also sings a song – a “popular tune from the Bolshevik war” (Pietrkiewicz’s own translation):

White roses are in bloom.
Return Jasienku, from the war, return,
Return and kiss me
As in years passed by...

Yet another aspect of Polishness in the book are references to Polish literature, for example, to *Pan Tadeusz* (the title appears in the original Polish version) in the scene when little Bronek is trying to read one of his first books: “Pan Ta-de-usz... By A-dam Mic-kie-wicz”⁴.

The language of *The Knotted Cord* is Pietrkiewicz’s unique experiment. The elements of the Polish rural dialect and the peasants’ culture in the region of Dobrzyń are transmitted into the English text. There are no footnotes or the author’s foreword introducing the reader to the distant and exotic world of the Polish countryside. Even though the novel is inevitably unclear at moments to someone brought up in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, the reviews were numerous and very positive. Both the plot and the language were highly praised by critics (Cieplińska 2012), for example:

A good novel, like a good painting, is international; but it gains rather than loses in richness by being clearly marked with national flavor. (Jones 1953)

The reviewer (the surname not given) of the Liverpool Evening Express wrote:

There are features about *The Knotted Cord* [...], which in themselves, would make it an outstanding novel on English. But it is in the nature of a double feat for the young Polish poet who wrote it, for when he arrived in Britain in 1940 for the first time in his life, he didn’t know any English. [...] The folklore and religious beliefs of a village people in a corner of Europe little known to the bulk of travellers, provide a colourful and absorbing background. (“Liverpool Evening Express” 1953)

Alexander J. Brown pointed out the author’s nationality and referred to Joseph Conrad:

To re-create such remote, early years so vividly is a notable feat of itself, but to do so in a strange language is astonishing, but after Conrad’s Polish novels, nothing should surprise us from a Pole. (Brown 1953)

Why was the book successful? Mainly, due to the fact that the plot, though distant for the English reader in terms of culture and geographical location of Poland, refers to such universal values like a nation’s connection with land, the core importance of religion and child psychology. In Britain, the pastoral myth, characteristic to pastoral literature which focuses on the genre’s typical imagery – portraying the idyllic rural life, presented as simple and orderly, remains a vital part of literary heritage. The picture of the Polish village community, functioning in harmonious order, accepting humbly the laws of nature, referred to the myth that was relevant for British recipients at the time.

Moreover, the religious implications strongly exposed in *The Knotted Cord* were in accordance with one of the trends characteristic of British literature in the 1950s, namely the trend of the Catholic

4 The first English translation of *Pan Tadeusz* appeared in Great Britain in 1885 under the title *Master Thaddeus; or, The Last Foray in Lithuania. A Historical Epic Poem in Twelve Books* translated by Maude Ashurst Biggs in collaboration with professor George Rapall Noyes who later founded School of Slavonic Literatures in Berkley (1917). Biggs’ translation was thoroughly discussed by Aleksandra Budrewicz in *Spory wokół wydania i przekładu*.

novel (Cieplińska 2013). Furthermore, words and expressions of Polish rural dialect interwoven into the text in their original spelling created the effect of authenticity and appeared to be an attractive element of the book.

Pietrkiewicz was well aware of the fact that the local dialect of the rural area and both overt and covert cultural implications which he presented in his book played a vital role in creating the exotic atmosphere of the Polish village depicted in *The Knotted Cord*. First of all, if he had written the novel in Polish, the risk of mediocre translation would have appeared, as the field of Polish-English literary translation was not developed in Britain in 1950s. Furthermore, the elements of the folklore – dialect and rites were particularly difficult parts for a potential translator. Secondly, though bilingual, the author was against self-translation. Pietrkiewicz decided to choose the third way – to write directly in English and cope with the transition of elements of Polish rural dialect of the Dobrzyń region and its vivid culture into the narrative. Finally, the idea of creating the unique “concoction” of Polish dialect incorporated into the English text, though challenging, appeared to be a very successful experiment.

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