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The Shame of the Peasant Body

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Introduction

At the heart of our thinking about postwar migrations from the countryside to urban centers and contemporary practices of discovering peasant genealogies there lies the problem, itself well-rooted in Polish culture, of the shame brought on by a peasant or a rural background. Announcing the return of the “peasant question” in 2014, Roch Sulima stressed that:

Shame is a very culturally productive social form, either adopted or imposed. Not every middle class person descended from the peasantry must necessarily work through the shame of their origins, as many are simply unburdened by this particular form of social censure. [...] The popular discussion of embarrassing pedigrees most likely indicates the establishment of one of the most important national clinics for Polish neuroses.¹

A similar tack is taken by the findings of Tomasz Rakowski, who argues that Poland’s widespread “culture of

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¹ Roch Sulima, “Sprawa chłopska i polskie ‘przeklęte problemy’” [The peasant issue and Polish “cursed problems”], *Kultura Współczesna* 1 (2015): 29. If not stated otherwise, all quotations from Polish are translated by the author of this article

shame” is to blame for the stigma that renders rural ancestry “marked with a defect” and consequently inferior and culturally lacking.² This framing is actualized in the modernization discourse, which describes the post-Second World War social shift in Poland basing on a binary that pits the modern and progressive against the backward and primitive. This dichotomy, however, necessarily paints one group in a negative light, degrading its social, cultural, and political standing and, as a result, putting it in a subordinate position to the dominant class.³ Rakowski points at two specific outcomes of this thinking about the peasantry: first, it fosters an incorrect belief that the group in question has an inherent cultural disposition (a “peasant mentality” for example), and second, it encourages the use of the rural ancestry category to justify and explain the misfortunes suffered by Polish society.⁴ These (ab) uses identified by the scholar suggest two diverging interpretations of peasantry: one sees it as a discursive figure “used in thinking,” while the other conceives it as the social experience of countryside dwellers.⁵

- 2 See Tomasz Rakowski, “Potomkowie chłopów – wolni od kultury” [Descendants of peasants – free from culture], *Miesięcznik Znak* 692 (2012), accessed June 2, 2020, <https://www.miesiecznik.znak.com.pl/6922013tomasz-rakowskipotomkowie-chlopow-wolni-od-kultury/>. Cf. Rakowski, “Sztuka w przestrzeniach wiejskich i eksperymenty etnograficzne. Pożegnanie kultury zawstydyzenia: jednoczasowość, zwrot ku sobie, proto-socjologia” [Art in rural spaces and ethnographic experiments. Farewell to the culture of shame: simultaneity, turning towards oneself, proto-sociology], *Teksty Drugie* 4 (2016): 66–67.
- 3 Michael Kearney, *Reconceptualizing the Peasantry. Anthropology in Global Perspective* (London: Routledge, 1995); James Wilce, “How Shame Spreads in Modernity,” in Wilce, *Crying Shame: Metaculture, Modernity, and the Exaggerated Death of Lament* (Malden, MA: Wiley–Blackwell, 2009), 118–138.
- 4 Traces of such an interpretation of peasantry can be found in much earlier texts. In the 1934 essay *Najazd, którego nie było* [An invasion that wasn’t] Stanisław Czernik debates a diagnosis offered by Jan Emil Skiński, who argued it was the influx of students with rural backgrounds that was to blame for the academic deterioration of Polish studies at the time. See Stanisław Czernik, “Najazd, którego nie było,” [The invasion that never happened], in Czernik, *Z podglebia* (Warszawa: LSW, 1966), 54. After Second World War, Józef Chałasiński similarly took a stand against elitist tendencies among intellectuals, harking back to the years before the war, and their dislike of fellow thinkers of rural descent. Chałasiński noted that considerable space in columns, op-eds, and magazines at the time was dedicated to rereading the well-worn trope of warning against enrolling too many students with peasant backgrounds at the universities [he used a piece from the popular *Tygodnik Powszechny* as an example – author’s note]. See Józef Chałasiński, *Przeszość i przyszłość inteligencji polskiej* [The past and future of the Polish intelligentsia] (Warszawa: Świat Książki, 1997), 79.
- 5 Roch Sulima, “Źródło i pion. Figury myślenia o ludowości” [Source and vertical. Figures of thinking about folklore], in Sulima, *Literatura a dialog kultur* (Warszawa: LSW, 1982),

Remarkably appealing empirical research material is offered by advancement narratives, recounting individual and societal experiences of “departees” and their pursuit of identity, still bound by a very specific imaginary related to their rural origins. These departee experiences ultimately merge Rakowski’s two modalities of peasantry, which serves as a source of tensions, difficulties, and limitations they must tackle in their new (urban) environment. Discussing memoirs of upward mobility, Maja Głowacka and Magda Szcześniak argue:

Analyzed against the backdrop of social and economic contexts, including modes of circulation and types of actors involved in their generation, stories of social advancement may reveal deeply assimilated cultural outlooks on class hierarchies, the permeability of the social structure, and the degree of individual agency in the process of upward mobility.⁶

Taking a closer look at what shapes the experience of moving from the country to the city and how, I adopt a similar optics due to my focus on the social and cultural determinants of advancement and the strategies used in joining different social groups.

At the same time, my analysis is predicated on the category of shame, which enables me to capture that which remains unspoken, invisible, or undealt with in Polish culture. Hanna Gosk emphasizes that shame is “difficult to verbalize, situated among the low narratives, leaving dirty traces and stigmatizing what it touches. In long-term situations, it often becomes unbearable.”⁷ Shame indicates both the problematic nature of Polish collective identity, as well as the ambivalence of the space of public life; all the while the rules governing both significantly affect the experience of the individual. This impact is intense insofar as it manifests in bodily reactions – flushed face,

75–116. Cf. Grzegorz Grochowski, “Kwestia chłopska” [The peasant question], in *Chłopska (nie)pamięć. Dziedzictwo chłopskości w polskiej literaturze i kulturze*, ed. Grzegorz Grochowski, Dorota Krawczyńska and Grzegorz Wołowicz (Kraków: Universitas, 2019), 7–11.

6 Maja Głowacka and Magda Szcześniak, “Emocje w powojennych pamiętnikach osób awansujących” [Emotions in the post-war diaries of people who were promoted], *Teksty Drugie* 4 (2021): 267. Cf. Magda Szcześniak, *Poruszeni. Awans i emocje w socjalistycznej Polsce* [Moved. Promotion and emotions in socialism Poland] (Warszawa: Znak, 2023).

7 Hanna Gosk, “(Nie)obecność opowieści o wstydzie w narracji losu polskiego. Rekonesans” [The (absence) of stories about shame in the narrative of Polish fate. Reconnaissance], in *Kultura po przejściach, osoby z przeszłością. Polski dyskurs postzależnościowy – konteksty i perspektywy badawcze*, ed. Ryszard Nycz (Kraków: Universitas, 2011), 90.

lowered gaze, awkward movements.⁸ I see stories of upward mobility as a variant of a narrative which ties shame closely to the “peasant body.” Given the somatic and affective context of the experience of moving from the country to the city, we could argue that it’s premised on a tension between the belief in the inalienable nature of peasant ancestry, etched into the body and identifiable through certain gestures, posture, movements, behaviors, and even individual physical attributes, and the cultural construct of the “peasant body,” based around seeing certain qualities as “peasant” and consequently marked by social maladjustment, helplessness, and incompatibility with established cultural norms.

Rural Ancestry as “Searing Shame”

In his 1946 memoir *Z Komborni w świat* [From Kombornia into the world], Stanisław Pigoń argues that the loss of connection with their birthplace experienced by “peasant sons” receiving their education in the city is closely tied to their seeing their background as embarrassing baggage or, more precisely, to fostering that position toward rural origins through shame. The author explains this link as follows:

Timid new arrivals, the young, awkward wildlings were often lost in the rarefied air of a station higher than their own; they didn’t know how to behave, how to move, how to talk. [...] We are seeing a lamentable loss of native qualities in farmer sons educated in city schools. Why, it might be the very root of the evil we are discussing. It is here, at their lodgings, fresh countryside arrivals would receive a schooling in manners that whittled down everything even remotely rustic about them, to such a degree that later – to little surprise – they would deny any affiliation with countryside stock, conceal their peasantness like a searing shame, and etch any and all slights deep into their hearts.⁹

While Pigoń’s account pertains to pre-Second World War upward mobility, unfolding in a different historical and social context than the mobility this essay is focused on, and while it connotes a romantic interpretation of

8 See Silvan Tomkins, “Shame-Humiliation and Contempt-Disgust,” in *Shame and Its Sisters. A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 134. Piotr Szejnach explores the social foundation of shame in the context of Polish art in Piotr Szejnach, “Sztuka wstydu” [The art of shame], *Krytyka Polityczna* 31/32 (2013): 101.

9 Stanisław Pigoń, *Z Komborni w świat. Wspomnienia młodości* [From Kombornia into the world. Memories of youth] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1957), 137–138.

“peasantness,” one enmeshed in nationality discourses,¹⁰ the memoir still offers meaningful findings pointing to the affective character of country-city migrations. At the same time, the record also enables us (on account of their specific timeframe) to capture the phenomena and social mechanisms shaping the empowerment of the peasantry (brought on by their migrations into the cities, their education, increased participation in social and cultural life, etc.) and then interrogate them through a *longue durée* lens. The passage cited above indicated that the experience of upward mobility is formed in the context of a socialization process aiming to peasantness and subordinate it to the cultural supremacy of the privileged classes. Pigoń labels it a “schooling in manners” that “whittled down everything even remotely rustic” about the new arrivals. From this perspective, peasantness, on the one hand, implies an inability to adopt proper behaviors and follow certain urban norms (lack of “manners”), and on the other manifests itself in the aforementioned rustic excess – a sort of expansiveness, a spirited overflow that explodes established norms. In his novel, penned after the release of Pigoń’s memoirs, Tadeusz Nowak has his protagonists, arriving in Krakow for university entrance exams, greeted by elderly people sitting in a park ringing the Old Town with words like “look at the churls, looking like goatshit and spreading like mushrooms.”¹¹ Seen as a part of this “profuse, overabundant” peasantness, the ability to transgress and violate established norms is, at the same time, perceived as a threat by those occupying privileged positions in existing social and cultural orders.

In the process of taming the “peasant spirit,” shame becomes a key (and effective) affect due to its association with modernity, one pointed out by Norbert Elias in his seminal study *The Civilizing Process*. In his interpretation, shame plays the role of a (self)-disciplining instrument which – by way of modeling human behaviors to match established social patterns – compels compliance with external imperatives of change through the undoing of past habits and customs.¹² The dual positive-negative character of shame stems

10 Grzegorz Wołowicz reads Pigoń’s memoir as an “educational tale retracing the difficult path of a peasant from the Galicia region and his rise from society’s lowest rungs all the way up to enjoying all the perks of citizenship.” See Grzegorz Wołowicz, “Filologia i nacjonalizm. Stanisław Pigoń jako ideolog kultury ludowo-narodowej” [Philology and nationalism. Stanisław Pigoń as an ideologist of folk and national culture], in *Chłopska (nie) pamięć*, 103. Cf. Czesław Kłak, *Pigoń* (Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego, 2013).

11 Tadeusz Nowak, *Diabły. Dwunastu* [Devils. The twelve] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1977), 397.

12 Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process. Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 160.

from entanglement with attempts at modernization, spanning not just individuals but entire social groups. On the one hand, it enables the emergence of a critical awareness of one's own position in the world, defined by a variety of contexts (like class, for example); building on Elias, James Wilce argues that it encourages deciding between either resistance or subordination to one's position in the social hierarchy.¹³ On the other, shame – which Silvan Tomkins calls an “affect of indignity, of defeat, of transgression, and of alienation” – is suffered as “inner torment, a sickness of the soul.”¹⁴ The experience of shame is intense, as it affects the subject as if from the inside, producing a sense of vulnerability of the self, exposing one's own weakness, inadequacy, or lack suggesting an inability to meet social norms and expectations. Which is why Elias ties shame to status anxiety, often accompanied by a pronounced sense of powerlessness toward the advantages held by those higher in the social hierarchy, as well as the inability to extricate oneself from the external (but internalized) compulsion to behave and act according to existing norms.¹⁵

Through shaming, the “deportees” begin to see their rural/peasant ancestry as – to borrow from Pigoń – a “searing shame.” In other words, countryside roots become something of a mark. Incorporated into normative discourses, this stigma reveals its links to the construction, valuation, and hierarchization of social identities. Erving Goffman emphasizes that “the lifelong attributes of a particular individual may cause him to be type-cast; he may have to play the stigmatized role in almost all of his social situations.”¹⁶ The devaluation of a person carrying the stigma, manifested in a variety of forms of restrictive discriminations, finds sanction and justification in the derivatively formulated “stigma-theory”: an ideology explaining the inferiority attributed to stigmatized persons and – equally importantly – legitimizing the sense of threat and animosity exhibited by “normies,” driven by differences in religious belief, nationality, or ancestry.¹⁷ One instrument of stigmatizing the “peasant spirit” can be found in the category of the “cham” – a Polish word that translates into “churl,” “boor” or “lout,” carrying connotations of serfdom, indenture, and inferiority – conceived by the nobility discourse and used, as Kacper Pobłocki

13 Wilce, “How Shame Spreads in Modernity,” 120–121.

14 Tomkins, “Shame-Humiliation and Contempt-Disgust,” 133.

15 See Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, 417–418. Cf. Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity. Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 209–214.

16 Erving Goffman, *Stigma. Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 138.

17 *Ibid.*, 5.

recapitulates in his latest book, to define the limits of peasant emancipation. To those who aspired to higher social standing, it presented a barrier of social distinction and reminded of their appropriate class position, predefined by their birth certificate.¹⁸ The cultural construct of peasantness, therefore, is conceived to normativize and exclude. Although formulated within a discourse that is itself outside rural, countryside culture, it is actualized in the experience of the “departees” – that is people who left the country for the city – and ensnares them in the hierarchical relationships of power.

In his memoirs, Pigoń argues that peasantness requires taming, but in the form of a proper education, rather than forcible instruction in etiquette that relies on a shaming mechanism. Young men from the countryside arrive in the city wholly unprepared, with no insight into how to behave and move around in urban and urbane settings. Their confusion and alienation – obviously stemming from their relocation into a strange and unfamiliar place – drive their readjustment and identity issues. They also increase the risk of them making a social blunder, which can lead to further stigmatization. All of this leaves the departees moving from the country to the city experiencing a profound vulnerability, fueled by the uncertainty of one’s place in a new environment, greater susceptibility to harm, and greater dependence on others. Helen M. Lynd argues that shame only amplifies this experience:

We [...] become strangers in a world where we thought we were at home. We experience anxiety in becoming aware that we cannot trust our answers to the questions Who am I? Where do I belong? [...] With every recurrent violation of trust we become again children unsure of ourselves in an alien world.¹⁹

Navigating their urban environments, the departees are left to fend for themselves, struggling – as Pigoń notes – “against fate” and “bourgeois obscurantism.” Hence his indictment of “rural middle schools” as delinquent in their social and cultural education efforts, whose primary objective ought to be the “diligent and careful ennobling of country dwellers” and the “shaping of raw material” drawing on the specific community culture of the countryside.²⁰ While his call for a cultural education blending urban and rural norms seems valid (although the viability of such a project and its framework are a whole other issue), the language Pigoń uses to describe the new arrivals and their

18 Kacper Pobłocki, *Chamstwo* [Rabble] (Wołowiec: Czarne, 2021), 152–155.

19 Helen M. Lynd, *On Shame and the Search for Identity* (New York City, NY: Harcourt & Brace, 1958), 46–47.

20 Pigoń, *Z Komborni w świat*, 138.

need for education warrants a closer look. His phrasing reveals the trap of a hierarchical interpretation of the relationship between the city and the country, which implies a tension between “being a peasant,” here associated with being firmly rooted in the pre-modern world, and the “clumsy savage,” who brings up connotations with the primal and primitive, and requires an “ennobling,” that a civilizing process (which essentially entails a readjustment to dominant norms defined by the upper classes and the intellectuals). In effect, the modern/primitive binary inherent in the upward mobility experience conceives peasantness as shapeless raw matter lacking any cultural capital.

Internalizing the Figure of the *Cham*

Pigoń’s notes on the stigmatization process conceived as “whittling away the peasantness,” which brings about the shame of one’s own rural ancestry, suggest that it is the self-identification as a “*cham*” that serves as the foundational moment in which the departee identity constitutes itself. By formulating in his memoirs a call for the “ennobling of the peasantry,” Pigoń signals the readiness of the peasant class to interact with the culture cultivated by and reserved for the nobles and the intellectuals – the problem, however, is that as they embrace it, the departees internalize the stigma of peasantness with its inherent belief in social distinction, and adopt an attitude of scorn toward their own ancestry.²¹ For individuals with a rural background, this internalization experience was all the more piercing as it tied peasantness with their bodies and rendered it incompatible with existing norms and requiring a corrective. The somatic aspect of these individuals’ internalization experience was already touched upon by Pierre Bourdieu in his 1960s findings,²² in which he describes the desirability of countryside bachelors using his native village in southwestern France as an example. Observing a local ball, Bourdieu noted that peasants were increasingly rejected as potential candidates

21 Already in his prewar work exploring the younger generation of peasant men Chałasiński wrote about the threats posed by education supporting the culture of the nobility: “until lately, schooling peasant sons was in no way a manifestation of the process of democratizing Polish culture. Rather, it was the ‘ennobling’ of peasant youth. The education of rural youth was not driven by democratic reactions against the patrician nature of culture, but rather by accepting said nature and a desire to attain patrician status by way of education.” Józef Chałasiński, *Młode pokolenie chłopów* [The young generation of peasants] (Warszawa: LSW, 1984), 95.

22 The example suggests that the stigmatization of “lower” social stations is in no way limited solely to Polish culture. Cf. Annie Ernaux, *The Years*, trans. Alison L. Strayer (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2022); Didier Eribon, *Returning to Reims*, trans. Michael Lucy (London: Penguin Books, 2019).

for marriage and the phenomenon was driven by two tendencies reflecting certain relationships between the center and the periphery: on the one hand there were the shifting aspirations and expectations of local women, prompted by urban influences, and on the other the peasants' self-perception as *em-peasanted bodies*. Bourdieu calls this internalization of the empeasanted body, presuming a consciousness of its inconsistency with prevailing expectations, a "privileged occasion of [...] coming to awareness of the peasant condition." In the scholar's view, the shyness and awkwardness of country bachelors at the ball stems from their obsessive focus on their own bodies as marked with a "social stamp," which ultimately prompts them to abandon their matrimonial efforts.²³ Situated in cultural contexts seeking to tame peasantness, the bodies of the departees connote frailty, weakness, and clumsiness, ultimately confirming their inferior social status.²⁴

The internalization of this negatively charged picture of the self that does not fit the social ideal unfolds in the course of social interaction based on humiliation correlated with shame. In Martha Nussbaum's interpretation, humiliation constitutes the "active, public face of shame," deliberately oriented at violating and debasing one's dignity. Explaining the link between shame and humiliation, the theorist writes: "to humiliate someone is to expose them to shame; and to shame someone is, in most cases, to humiliate them (at least if the shaming is severe enough)."²⁵ The modus of humiliation plays a major role in constituting relationships within the imaginary of Polish culture. In his book *Prześniona rewolucja* [Sleepwalking the revolution], Andrzej Leder writes that the pre-1939 domination of the nobility and the postwar domination of administrative and military elites manifested themselves mostly through the humiliation of other parts of society, primarily the peasantry. Although wartime occupation brought about a complete restructuring of Polish society, the social and professional spheres (particularly the relationship between employer and employee) are to this day shaped by what Leder has come to call a "folwark mentality" ["folwark" is Polish for an agricultural

23 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Peasant and His Body*, in Bourdieu, *Bachelors' Ball. The Crisis of Peasant Society in Béarn*, trans. Richard Nice (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 86. For more on the changing landscape of marriage in the Polish countryside, see Ewelina Szpak, *Mentalność ludności wiejskiej w PRL. Studium zmian* [Mentality of the rural population in the Polish People's Republic. Change study] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2013).

24 Cf. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York City, NY: Pantheon Books, 1977), 24–31.

25 Martha Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 203.

estate owned by a nobleman and worked primarily by indentured peasantry and serfs – transl. note].²⁶ In Pigoń's memoirs, this relationship is explored in the following passage:

Peasants refuse to wear old-fashioned outfits as these draw the ridicule of city folk. They find themselves mocked by fellow passengers on trains, bitterly joked about by scribes at the revenue office. Wearing city garb, meanwhile, gets them respect and polite talk. [...] Small wonder, then, that few peasants would want to submit themselves to poor treatment like that. Hence their efforts to meticulously conceal, belittle, and deny their own station. They will readily reject their traditional garb and hide their peasantry, to the detriment of our heritage.²⁷

The moment of shaming and humiliation captured by Pigoń well reflects Elias's reading of shame as an instrument of undoing past practices and thus stimulating adaptation to novel social and cultural circumstances. Moreover, it situates the departees within the tangle of antagonistic social relations, as the adoption of patterns typical of the nobility and intellectuals dominant in Polish culture requires that one's ties with one's rural birthplace are severed by way of a variety of concealment and denial practices used to avoid humiliation (the outfit change mentioned in the passage above is motivated by fear of ridicule). Such a "wounding" of identity is also brought up by Pigoń in a more autobiographical reference to his own experience of humiliation, which saw him ridiculed in a city school over his clothes – especially the tall boots that few wore in the city and his "native speech inflections, words borrowed from [...] native dialect, table manners, and other unsophisticated behaviors [emphasis mine – K. K.]"²⁸. Humiliation used as an instrument of stigmatization typically targets that which its victim holds close – native cultural heritage and the habits and customs of home. Confronting the rural self with the urban conception of peasantry results in a painful depreciation of that original identity, a process driven by the idea that "the most effective method to inflict long-lasting pain on a person is to humiliate them by making the things they considered the most important seem trivial, outdated, and powerless."²⁹

²⁶ Andrzej Leder, *Prześlona rewolucja. Ćwiczenie z logiki historycznej* [Sleepwalking the revolution] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2014) 98–101.

²⁷ Pigoń, *Z Komborni w świat*, 65–66.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 141.

²⁹ Gosk, "(Nie)obecność opowieści o wstydzie w narracji losu polskiego. Rekonesans," 87.

The process of internalizing the “*cham* body,” unfolding as part of the transition from the country-city transition, can be traced in the Tadeusz Nowak novel *Diabły. Dwunastu* [Devils. The twelve], especially its later parts, describing the arrival of the eponymous twelve characters in Krakow where they are set to begin college. Lost in a city they do not know, they ask passersby for directions until they finally start to wonder about the manner they are being addressed in:

Looking at the people, clearly rushing to one office or another, we hailed a slender young lady wearing a black coat, flats on cork soles, and a round hat pinned to her hair, styled up and resembling a soldier’s helmet. “Where are they going?” She asked, without breaking stride. [...]

It was only when we stopped in front of a store window and saw our reflections showing us with pant legs too short, blazers buttoned up despite the heat, shoes caked in dust, hats worn askew, hands red and never not calloused, and eyes that shone with fear and a barely concealed image of a horse pulling a cart, its tail swinging left and right to shoo away the horseflies, and the manure spread behind the barn, we finally realized that these were the same words and the same delivery that our fathers heard from manor lords, lawyers in town, teachers, and even the old reverend when he’d forget himself.³⁰

Shame, Sara Ahmed argues, emerges “before others,” prompted by a gaze that spark the need to run away and hide: “on the one hand, shame covers that which is exposed (we turn away, we lower our face, we avert our gaze), while on the other, shame exposes that which has been covered.”³¹ Elsewhere, Ruth Leys notes that in affect studies, shame is conceived primarily as “specular affect that has the fantasy of visibility and disclosure built into it.”³² Seen by the eponymous “twelve” of the Nowak novel through the lens of a new socio-cultural setting, the body appears ugly and inferior, its awkwardness and incompatibility with the urban environment laid bare for all to see. The figure of the stigmatized peasant body is invoked by both the outfits worn by the protagonist and their attitudes, hands worn down by field work, and their insecure, frightened gazes. Later in the book, they speak of themselves: “leaning forward, as if carrying a heavy bucket in each

³⁰ Nowak, *Diabły. Dwunastu*, 394.

³¹ Sara Ahmed, “Shame Before Others,” in Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 104.

³² Ruth Leys, “Shame Now,” in Leys, *From Guilt to Shame. Auschwitz and After* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 128.

hand to water the horses, woolen hats on our heads [...].”³³ Only affected by a gaze that constitutes the “empeasanted/*cham* body” do they realize the specific manner that urban dwellers use when speaking to them. This idiolect situates them in a subordinate position, which – according to a model of Polish culture rooted in the master/serf binary – their ancestry predetermines them to. In the coercive compulsion to submit to those occupying positions of privilege, they recognize the intergenerational experience that defines their heritage.

Bodily Practices of Mimicry

The affective experience of “whittling away peasantness” involves both the objectification and subjectification of the individual. Transformed or profiled to fit socio-cultural norms, the individual is then incorporated into society and culture. The assimilatory impulse suggesting the purging of the “country/rural self” is manifested in the practices and gestures absorbed by the *departees*, developed within and enforced by the existing cultural paradigm that they aspire to. Breaking down the methods of incorporating practices making up the habitual experience of the body, Paul Connerton proposes a distinction, useful in the context of *departee* transitions, between the ability to identify a cultural code and the ability to assimilate it; between the casual, easy behavior of a person for whom a cultural norm is instinctive, “innate,” and the forced nonchalance and uncertainty over proper behavior that appear when a code is imposed upon or adopted by an individual.³⁴ The embarrassment and shyness of a person entering a different social group derives from the recognized mismatch between their body and the body that is socially acceptable. In effect, Connerton explains:

Unable to incarnate an acknowledged model, one tries vainly to compensate for this inability through the proliferation of the signs of bodily control. This is why the *petit-bourgeois* experience of the world is characterized by timidity and unease the unease of those who feel that their bodies betray them and who regard their bodies, as it were, from the outside and through the appraising eyes of others, surveying and correcting their practices.³⁵

33 Nowak, *Diabły, Dwunastu*, 397.

34 Paul Connerton, “Bodily Practices,” in Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 90.

35 *Ibid.*, 91.

Adapting one's body to a new cultural code is both a consequence of social advancement as well as an instrument for changing one's social status. The horizon of actions available to a subject attempting to conceal their ancestry under a mask of adopted behaviors and attained cultural competencies is defined by the risk of exposure, betraying oneself with some "native gesture."³⁶ The manifesting of bodily tensions related to the departee condition is well reflected in the Julian Kawalec novel *Tańczący jastrzęb* [Dancing hawk], which traces the meteoric rise through the social ranks of protagonist Michał Toporny, taking him from "a man born in a house with dirt floors" to an executive at a large mining enterprise. To shed his peasantry, Toporny performs a series of symbolic gestures, such as burning his peasant outfit, that indicate his will to transcend the more significant barriers to his upward mobility (class, social, and cultural). He swaps out his heavy work pants for a suit, changes his appearance, and even tailors his own gait to fit the brisk rhythm of the street:

You have this city stride about you now, and flow through the crowds on the street, no longer gawking like a peasant, [...] no longer bound by the serflike acceptance of life and death as they are; your heart no longer tapped out the slow rhythm of the country life, it beat much faster now. Wearing dark or light grey outfits you seemed even taller, after turning slender, and your face grew longer and more, let's say, hawklike.³⁷

A similar strategy was adopted by the narrator of the Tadeusz Nowak novel *Prorok* [The prophet], who employs violence turned inward to erase any bodily traces of peasantry: he puts his body through an exercise regimen that disciplines "primitive/rural" reactions and facial movements (a process he calls "righting his face"), tries to scrub himself of the "peasant odor" (hence his relentless bathing), takes meticulous care of his hands to erase any trace of hard labor from his "loaflike palms," and seeks to purge his speech of any rural inflections.³⁸

Due to their inherent performative potential, the gestures adopted by the departees in the pursuit of manipulating their own bodies connote an "urbaneness" that can only assume labile and partial forms and, consequently,

36 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 79.

37 Julian Kawalec, *Tańczący jastrzęb* [Dancing hawk] (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1974), 191.

38 Tadeusz Nowak, *Prorok* [The prophet] (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1977), 5.

demands repeated affirmation and ever new basis for legitimization. Pigoń describes this mechanism as he notes that it's the neophytes embracing class resentment that play the most harmful role in depreciating rural ancestry as a "searing shame": "whittled down in the same manner, the spiritual arriviste took out the slights he had to endure on the younger generations, his cruelty rising in proportion to his desire to appear higher in station, ennobled socially and culturally."³⁹ Humiliating the new rural émigrés is driven not just by the memories of their predecessors having their ancestry shamefully exposed, but also stands as a stamp that confirms entry into the ranks of urban dwellers, a position which is deeply conditional and steeped in fear of renewed exclusion. Goffman stresses that assimilating the dominant culture and erasing the stigma from oneself does not result in attaining "normie" status, but instead "a transformation of self from someone with a particular blemish into someone with a record of having corrected a particular blemish."⁴⁰ Following down the thread of the indelibility of stigma, we could argue that the process of "whittling away peasantness," based on dominant/subordinate relationships, follows the strategy of mimicry, which presumes the assimilation of and subordination to colonizer identities by the colonized. As Homi Bhabha points out, however, "colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite [emphasis original – K. K.]"⁴¹ The essence of mimicry lies in the visibility of difference inscribed into the body of the colonized. Because complete mimicry is not possible, the identity of the subaltern consistently constitutes itself in the moment that distinction, dissonance, or tension appear.

The indelible divergence between embodied and assimilated cultural codes defines the upward mobility experience of the protagonist of the aforementioned Kawalec novel. The scene describing his "act of grand transformation"⁴² or the "shedding of an old skin"⁴³ captures the moment he (re)discovers himself anew:

39 Pigoń, *Z Komborni w świat*, 138. Because in Pigoń's view resentment "feeds all sorts of social radicalisms, including in the peasantry" (139), he postulated embracing one's rural ancestry as an answer to the experience of being stripped of one's peasantness. For more on that subject, see Wołowicz, *Filologia i nacjonalizm*, 111–113.

40 Goffman, *Stigma*, 9.

41 Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28 (1984): 126.

42 Kawalec, *Tańczący jastrząb*, 165.

43 *Ibid.*, 172.

Born in a hut with packed clay for a floor, he performed a handful of seemingly careless skids on the polished marble, then, leaning slightly forward, approached a grand mirror, only to take a couple of steps back and look over his reflection from head to toe [...]. The bright light pouring from the lamps above revealed a figure familiar with the mean spirit of dried stubble fields, which now stood face to face with himself, but radically different, essentially a stranger. The man familiar with rakes, flails, and manure forks, performing dancelike, clownish curtsies, stared in disbelief and delight at his other self, familiar with higher mathematics, derivatives and integrals, complex calculations required to design machines, performing the same dancelike, clownish moves. When one drew close, the other followed suit; when one withdrew, the other followed suit; when performed an elegant twist, the other copied it exactly, like a well-trained dog [...].⁴⁴

Probing his gestures, examining the movements of his body, and viewing them with a critical gaze, Toporny ultimately engages in a grotesque performance that confronts the rural and the urban strains of his self. The connection between them reflects the imbalance in the symbolic field, where peasantry, equated in the passage above with an obedient dog, is situated in an inferior position and subjected to a strict regime of the urbane. This dissonance also manifests itself in the narrator's juxtaposition of experiences and knowledge apposite to respective pedigrees – and it's only education (that a country boy successfully completes) and intellectual capacity (attained through effort other than physical labor) that draw admiration. Between the two strains of the self, fascination only flows one way. The confrontation before the mirror seems to be staged for the purpose of suppressing the rural self, achieved by absorbing the Other, and choosing the projected reflection as the desired self-image of the protagonist: "the reflection is you and you are him."⁴⁵ Toporny gradually realizes the illusion of bodily practices of mimicry, which never bring him a sense of authenticity in imitation; furthermore, they lay bare his own dissimilarity stemming from an incomplete embodiment of the dominant cultural code. The protagonist's apprehension toward this adoptive body manifests itself in the scene, significant in this particular context, that features his confrontation with the young engineer who is both his subordinate and the lover of his second wife, a man who "drew at will on the casual ease allowed by his station, accumulated for him by generations before him."⁴⁶ In the presence

⁴⁴ Ibid., 172.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 173.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 246.

of engineer Zatorski, the protagonist is struck by a pervasive sense of lack, which he is simply unable to compensate for.

Summary

The cultural form of the shame of the peasant body, resulting in concealment and denial of rural ancestry, condemns countryside departees to relentless simulation of urbaneness, to an indelible sense of being trapped in between stations. The experience of social advancement, presuming a “whittling away of peasantness,” produces individuals othered twice over, at home neither in the city nor in the country. Even Pigoń admits to experiencing the pervasive artifice of the departee condition in his memoirs:

Rare are the moments where I was fully myself, without dissonance, that is when no obsessive reflection, no critical look from the outside into myself would mar the pleasure of living life, when I would be uniformly myself. There is always some sort of semi-self throwing its weight around, a blend of my own essence and random externalities, accrued on my soul. This likely means that I am fully caught in the claws of “culture,” stripped of my peasant honesty, spontaneity, the reflexive immediacy of sense and judgment. I feel robbed or mutilated.⁴⁷

The paradoxical experience of individuals experiencing upward mobility or, more broadly, of the middle class emerging in post-Second World War Poland manifests itself in two retroactive and (self)-reflective diagnoses. Firstly, the assimilation of patterns typical for the dominant culture, itself a marriage of tropes developed by the nobility and bourgeois intellectuals, provided only a short-term opportunity for the departees to conceal their “coarseness”⁴⁸ and suppress internalized shame and class-driven humiliation. Eventually, it produces a sense of status apprehension and anxiety. Secondly, the experience of advancement results in the belief that the city does not offer the departees any identity alternatives that would not require from them to judge and ultimately suppress their peasantness or, in other words, that would lead to its “spontaneous” erasure. The passage from Pigoń’s memoirs above indicates the existence of deeply pervasive cultural hierarchies premised on stigmatizing rural ancestry. Even when a person, like Pigoń, affirms their countryside pedigree,

47 Pigoń, *Z Komborni w świat*, 246–247.

48 A reference to the last name of the protagonist of the aforementioned novel, Michał Toporny. Used like this, the word “toporny” means “coarse” or “crude,” and in the novel, it denotes the condition of being-in-between.

they are still subject to culturally entrenched shame of rural/peasant origins and only notice the value of what their advancement took from them too late.

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Abstract

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The Shame of the Peasant Body

The article considers the experience of moving from the countryside to the city depicted in selected narratives of social advancement. The analysis focuses on the stigmatization of peasant origin through shame, which closely correlates with the physical and affective dimensions, a key process for the condition of "migrants." The strong status of peasant roots as a shameful stigma in Polish culture is connected to the mechanism of its internalization by the individuals who experienced social advancement. As such, the status influences advancement strategies, preferring adaptation to urban patterns through bodily practices of mimicry.

Keywords

shame, origin, birthplace, village, peasant body