

An Eastern European “Sahib” in the Former Colony of the Western Powers: Andrzej Bobkowski in Guatemala (1948-1961)

A Polish writer, Andrzej Bobkowski (1913-1961), posthumously gained undeniable fame and sympathy of readers. This “hooligan of freedom,” as he defined himself, who rode a bicycle along the Côte d’Azur and constructed airplane models in remote Guatemala, was indeed straightforward, charming and had lots of literary talent. However, after a wave of enthusiasm towards the author and his writing, some interpreters sought to take a look at his work more critically. One of the most notorious of such attempts was an article by Łukasz Mikołajewski, which revealed Bobkowski’s anti-Semitism. The researcher compared the most famous book of the writer, a wartime diary written in France, *Szkice piórkami* [*Pen sketches*], with the manuscript, and discovered that in the postwar edition from 1957 Bobkowski removed excerpts that resembled the Nazi discourse on Jews.¹

Another thread of Bobkowski’s work, which requires attention of historians of literature and which I am going to investigate in this article, is the image of Guatemala and its inhabitants presented in the writer’s diaries, short stories, and most notably correspondence. Analyzing these texts, I will reveal that the author overtly or tacitly manifested the mentality of nineteenth-century colonizer. Despite the fact that he truly loved Guatemala, where he settled in 1948 and lived until his death, he perceived it with a belief in the superiority of the white man’s civilization. Such a viewpoint, I intend to point out, resulted not only from a condescending attitude of Bobkowski, a European towards a non-European population, but also from his own experience, gained in Western Europe, of being from the second-class world, i.e., Eastern Europe. Thus, I will analyze a curious case of colonial othering manifested by Bobkowski, an immigrant who came from Poland via France to Guatemala, an area which had been formerly a western colony. In a paradoxical manner, this immigrant, whose homeland – a Soviet-dominated country after the Second World War – experienced subjection to foreign rule, in another post-colonial space took on the role of the white colonizer, at least in attitudes and perceptions.

The decision of life and death

¹ Ł. Mikołajewski, “Pamięć fabularyzowana. Powojenne poprawki w *Szkicach piórkami* Andrzeja Bobkowskiego,” *Res Publica Nova* 2011, no 15.

Bobkowski together with his wife, Barbara *de domo* Birtus, arrived in France in March 1939, when he was not yet 26. The couple's stay was to have a temporary character as they were waiting for the completion of formalities and the onward journey to Buenos Aires, where Bobkowski, a graduate of the Warsaw School of Economics, was going to take up a job in accordance with his education. This plan was not realized and the outbreak of the Second World War found Andrzej and Barbara in Paris. They lived there for nine years and after that time, in 1948, made a step, which Bobkowski's acquaintance, literary critic Tymon Terlecki, called "the decision of life and death."² Namely, they packed their meager belongings and, on June 28, boarded the *Jagiello*-ship bound for Guatemala, having had not more than 100 dollars in their pocket, knowing little Spanish and even less about Central American living conditions.

While the mere choice of Guatemala was random to some extent – Bobkowski's contact person promised him a job there, what ultimately failed – there were several reasons why the writer decided to change his residence so radically. Perhaps at the core of this move lay Bobkowski's desire to experience an overseas adventure, which he had signaled several times. Before the war he wrote to his wife's sister, Anna Seifert: "I am simply, humanly, pulled to another world, climate, people, nature.... There is something in me that tightens up and rises to the sun."³ Three months before the cruise, he informed his uncle, Aleksander Bobkowski: "Well – one Bobkowski is going to conquer. I really have something of an adventurer in myself. It makes me happy."⁴ Apparently, Bobkowski was eager to think about his decision in terms of exciting, hazardous activity, resembling a thread of adventure book for boys. In a letter to Jerzy Turowicz, the editor in chief of the weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny*, he seemed to be clearly proud that he was "a wild one"⁵ brave enough to jump into the unknown.

Another reason why the author moved over the ocean was his deep disappointment with Europe, which started to increase right after the beginning of the war up to the level of complete rejection of the old continent. In spring 1948, having planned the journey, Bobkowski wrote to his acquaintance, a famous writer Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz:

² T. Terlecki, "Andrzej Bobkowski," in A. Bobkowski, *Listy do Tymona Terleckiego 1956-1961*, ed. N. Taylor-Terlecka, Warsaw 2006, p. 8.

³ J. Zieliński, "'Ode mnie przynajmniej listy coś są warte'. O listach Andrzeja Bobkowskiego do rodziny," *Twórczość* 1984, no 8, p. 87.

⁴ A. Bobkowski, *Listy do Aleksandra Bobkowskiego 1940-1961*, ed. J. Podolska, Warsaw 2013, p. 43, letter from 21.03.1948.

⁵ A. Bobkowski, *Listy do Jerzego Turowicza 1947-1960*, ed. M. Urbanowski, Warsaw 2013, p. 40, letter from 31.05.1948.

I am starting to write all my letters in a “testamentary” mood now. Simply because if nothing occurs, in the first half of May, probably on 13th,⁶ I am sailing from Cannes to Cristobal in Panama. From there I am flying by plane to Guatemala. I am starting to bequeath something to everybody. To you I am bequeathing Europe. Actually, the worst thing I have left. It’s an embarrassing legacy.⁷

Having regarded Europe as the worst, the most embarrassing part of his heritage, the writer depreciated qualities, which had provided a basis for his psycho-intellectual dispositions, and hinted that he saw them in a catastrophic perspective. In his diaries, postwar journalism, and correspondence alike Bobkowski found Europe, especially the West, degraded and humiliated, first, because it had been subjected to Hitler’s totalitarianism, and second, because it had not resisted Stalin’s totalitarianism. As a result of passivity and indifference, the writer pointed out, Western Europe lost its spiritual identity and revealed an axiological void. It became conformist and cowardly, the best proof of which was in that after the war it acquiesced in the Soviet Union’s control over its eastern regions, succumbed to an illusion that the Western scrap of the European mainland was the whole continent, and froze in expectation of aid from the United States. Western Europe – Bobkowski summed up – ceased to be an inspiring, fertile ground; the only thing it was still able to deliver was a disgusting type of man, fleeing from freedom, massified, of individualism reduced to zero.

Last but not least, Bobkowski decided to start a new life in Guatemala because not having wanted to stay in Western Europe, he also did not want to go back to Poland, which after the war found itself in the Soviet zone of influence. He explained his reasons in his fictional diptych *Pożegnanie* [*Farewell*] and *List* [*A Letter*] (1948). A protagonist of the latter, dialoguing with a friend who has chosen to return to the country, said:

I don’t want and I can’t condemn myself to a lifetime lying, which not only I couldn’t talk about but which also you would make me justify.... On behalf of any system and any political orientation I can’t be quiet when I know I should talk.... Here the thoughts dictate my words, there permitted words have started to dictate thoughts.⁸

Bobkowski, like the protagonist of his short story, knew that he had no place in his homeland that was progressively converted into a totalitarian panopticon. He rejected Poland, already in the first stage of the communist transformation, because he opposed the political organization

⁶, The trip, initially planned for May 13, was ultimately shifted to June.

⁷ “*Tobie zapisuję Europę*”. *Listy Andrzeja Bobkowskiego do Jarosława Iwaszkiewicza*, ed. J. Zieliński, *Twórczość* 1986 no 2, p. 77, letter from 21.03.1948.

⁸ A. Bobkowski, “List,” in A. Bobkowski, *Coco de oro*, Lublin 1998, p. 65.

and administration of human life. His desire was to stay “a regular, ordinary man” living in line with his inner rules, not an adherent of any political faith who was deprived of “the holy right not to believe.”⁹

In short, thus, Bobkowski went to Guatemala to realize a boyish “dream about the jungle” he was having “from an early age”¹⁰ but first and foremost to defend his own sense of individualism and dignity. From his perspective, the escape from Europe in general, and Poland in particular was a way to stay free from petrified, faked pseudo-values of the old continent, which had not withstood the test of the Second World War.

To be a quetzal

Guatemala, a country with a colonial past, whose territory was conquered by Spanish conquistadors in 1523, did not constitute a stable political reality in the late 1940s and 1950s when Andrzej and Barbara Bobkowskis lived there. It was economically dependent on big Northern American concerns and notoriously torn by military upheavals. In 1949 the power of Communists strengthened, and in 1950 the dictatorship of the leftist president Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán – and terror no less than behind the Iron Curtain – began. The most acute revolt was the coup spearheaded by the colonel Carlos Castillo Armas, supported by CIA, in 1954. Bobkowski, who detested every form of Communism, wrote during that time about “liberation of Guatemala” and “defeat of Communism” that could have threatened all the territory between Panama and Mexico.¹¹ The revolution, however, did not palliate internal conflicts in the country. On the contrary, in 1960 partisan struggle turned into a civil war, lasting decades, with two hundred thousand casualties, mostly civilians.

Despite those facts, Bobkowski not only became so attached to Guatemala that he called it “his second homeland”¹² and never considered coming back to Europe; he also perceived this country as a land of those who can get “a broad breath” [szeroki oddech],¹³ i.e., those who are internally free, faithful to their own principles, and able to appreciate the value of everyday life. A few months after his arrival, having struggled with starting his own business that consisted in manufacture and sale of airplane models, he declared, “I am still

⁹ A. Bobkowski, “Krzyk chuligana,” in A. Bobkowski, *Ikkos i Sotion oraz inne szkice*, ed. P. Kądziała, Warsaw 2009, p. 156, 151.

¹⁰ See: “The jungle! I was always dreaming about it!... From an early age. And here it is!...” Such Bobkowski’s words were noted by Aleksander Grobicki who visited the writer in Guatemala, in 1959. A. Grobicki, “Ślady na czarnym piasku,” *Kultura* 1961, no 1-2, p. 82.

¹¹ A. Bobkowski, “Zachód nareszcie wyzwala,” *Kultura* 1955, no 1-2.

¹² A. Bobkowski, *Listy do Jerzego Turowicza*, p. 108, letter from 15.02.1960.

¹³ A. Bobkowski, “Na tyłach,” in A. Bobkowski, *Coco de oro*, p. 74.

facing long months of hard days. But these days I can always be in harmony with myself, free, independent, in a position 'at ease' with a cigarette in my mouth. Not at attention in the 'Europalager.'"¹⁴ Over time, after settling in Guatemala and breaking through the "eye of the storm," as the writer used to call gaining experiences in model making, he became convinced that he truly lived only in that "pocket country" where "nobody was in a crowd" – in a sense of individualism and self-realization. That conviction led him to the findings of constitutive properties for his subjectivity. Such findings transformed a sense of alienation in a foreign world into a participatory experience lying at the core of a man's identity: "I am an emblem of Guatemala, their bird, a quetzal. There are only stuffed specimens, because living in a cage they die after a few days. And I do not want to die and to be seen stuffed."¹⁵ These comments show that living in Guatemala meant for Bobkowski following an existential project of a highly ethical character, subordinated to an imperative: "to be a quetzal," i.e. a free man, deciding for himself, and not subjected to any ideology that did not care about the rights and needs of individuals.

Bobkowski often, especially in the essays "Na tyłach" ["Behind the front"] (1949) and "Pytania dzikich ludzi" ["Savages' questions"] (1951), contrasted Europe with Guatemala or all of Central America, and Europeans with Latinos. In both of these texts America¹⁶ was presented as a land of broadly understood freedom and its inhabitants, although "savage" in terms of cultural erudition, as authentic and sensible instead. Europeans, for a change, were in the writer's opinion hypocrites devoid of an elemental instinct of liberty and taking the abstract creations of their intellect for reality. Bobkowski assigned the qualities traditionally associated with the Old World – independence, rationality, the ideal of authenticity – to the New World to appreciate America and to prove a thesis that contemporary Europeans were primitive destroyers of their own heritage. "A European who does not want to be free, ceases

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 83.

¹⁵ "Tobie zapisuję Europę", p. 90, letter from 26.12.1948.

¹⁶ Bobkowski used a term "America" in his writing, having meant Central America, sometimes all of Latin America, but not United States that he distinguished from the rest of American mainland. There were two reasons why he did it. First, Central America was the world he lived in and hence his reference point. Second, he came to USA for the first time at the end of 1955 and found it different not only from Europe but also from Mesoamerica. The writer was uncritically delighted by USA. He wrote to his mother: "I felt [there] primarily an increase of intensity of life, something exciting and wonderful. Like a big gulp of space, something that adds energy and willingness to look forward ... Such a gulp of space simply rejuvenates. I felt young again, embedded in my time, my age and without any longings back [tęsknoty wstecz]," A. Bobkowski, *Listy z Gwatemali do matki*, Warsaw 2008, p. 171, letter from 29.10.1956. Bobkowski appreciated USA as much more developed country than countries of Central America and did not perceive USA as an imperial power that sought to control Central American economics and politics. Further I follow the way Bobkowski used the term "America".

to be a European. To stay one I had to leave,”¹⁷ the author commented, at one stroke defending his life decision and suggesting that “normal cultural Europe” could be found only far away from the old continent.

What is interesting, Bobkowski occasionally showed awareness that representatives of the Old World perceived territories and dwellers of their former colonies in a deeply depreciating way. He asked in the essay “Na tyłach”:

The world, the new world, the third big world. We hardly talk about it, we mock Guatemalas, Costa Ricas, San Salvadors, and other Hondurases, but what do we know about them? It is an incredibly rich area, big and open, full of freedom and still yet the best traditions of Europe. Who knows, maybe the spirit can survive right here and bloom fruit again? I do not feel at all that I am in a small town, a small country. I feel primarily a continent underfoot, vast, gorgeous, bursting with life.¹⁸

Having asked such questions, Bobkowski not only thematized a problem of the existence of unfair colonial stereotypes but also sought to argue with them. His words from a letter to Turowicz constitute a telling testimony to that fact: “The Spanish discovered these countries [in the mid-latitudes of the Americas] and covered them with so many lies and humbug that they need to be re-discovered now.”¹⁹ In another letter the writer unequivocally criticized the phenomenon of conquest. In his optics, the conquistadors of Middle America – Hermán Cortéz, Pedro de Alvarado, and Francisco Pizarro – were “ordinary scoundrels,”²⁰ who at the threshold of the modernity sowed violence that resulted in the atrocities of the twentieth century.²¹

On the surface, the writer’s existential project, and the vision of Guatemala subjected to it, do not raise suspicions. The fact that Bobkowski could not notice many inherent qualities of the New World, besides the beauty of nature, and transplanted them from his native continent, is of course striking. It proves undoubtedly that Europe remained for him the most important reference point and that, even after 1948, he was attached to European mainland with strong feelings, which had a lot of disappointed love. Nevertheless, the departure from Europe to remain European, to America, which is more European than Europe itself, at first glance seems a paradoxical but consistent life plan.

¹⁷ A. Bobkowski, “Na tyłach,” p. 77.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 80.

¹⁹ A. Bobkowski, *Listy do Jerzego Turowicza*, p. 49, letter from 12.05.1949.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 78, letter from 9.01.1950.

²¹ Ibid.

Among caballeros

To investigate deeper senses of the writer's vision of Guatemala one needs to look more closely and critically at his "Guatemalan" writing and correspondence with members of his family and best friends, with whom Bobkowski was the frankest. At the outset of such an investigation it is reasonable to ask the author his own question from the essay "Na tyłach": what did he really know about Guatemala and how to start a new life there? To answer this question, we should keep in mind that one of Bobkowski's intellectual desires was analyzing the character of nations, a passion popular aforesaid, today considered a source of harmful stereotypes and rather abandoned. Among his favorite books were *Letters from Russia* by Marquis de Custine, Banville and Michelet's works, but first and foremost *The Spectrum of Europe* by Hermann Keyserling, the writer's intellectual master. What Bobkowski knew about Mesoamerica was also connected with Keyserling because his image of that macro-region and its inhabitants proved to be modeled by the latter's *South America Meditations* from 1933. The philosopher delivered in his *Meditations* a complex description of Latin America and Latinos. According to his opinion, the continent was still ruled by wild telluric powers that in Europe had been already annihilated, while its dwellers were deprived of initiative and controlled by instincts, unconscious reflexes, and whimsical desires. It turns out that though Bobkowski wanted to see Guatemala as a land of freedom, sensibility, and authentic life, and often presented the country this way, he was not really able to reconsider Keyserling's views and identified with them, especially in his correspondence. Seven years after his arrival to Guatemala the author wrote about it openly to Jerzy Giedroyc, his intimate friend and a correspondent, with whom he exchanged the most letters:

One thing is certain, namely, that what Keyserling wrote in his *Meditations Sudamericanes*: that it is a continent of the third day of creation (reptiles and amphibians), and that something of this came into people. And that without understanding what is *gana*, this something unpredictable in these people, you can't understand them.²²

Such assessments did not mean that Bobkowski ceased to adore his "second homeland." Privately, however, especially in difficult moments, e.g., during financial crises in his business or political upheavals, he made comments that were in undoubted contradiction with such essays as "Na tyłach" or "Pytania dzikich ludzi." The writer was particularly critical towards Guatemalans, the vast majority of whom were Latinized Indians, i.e., the descendants of the Maya who had more or less blood of Spanish conquistadors in their veins. Just like

²² J. Giedroyc, A. Bobkowski, *Listy 1946-1961*, ed. J. Zieliński, Warsaw 1997, p. 302, letter from 10.10.1955.

Keyserling, Bobkowski wrote at least a few diatribes against Latin *gana*. For him it was a fatal force that he, as a merchant and entrepreneur faithful to the bourgeois ethos,²³ had to struggle with during the course of the whole stay in Guatemala. He sought to explain that phenomenon to Giedroyc as follows:

Only here I understood this term *gana* brilliantly picked up by Keyserling. In other words *gana* is **desire [ochota]**. But our desire is after all more concrete and precise in comparison to *gana*. They say in Spanish: Yo tengo gana de bailar = as if I feel like dancing. This *gana* comes out of everything here.²⁴

Surprisingly, Bobkowski combined comments of that kind with argumentation in which Central America and Latinos gained characteristics similar to those of Europe and Europeans, yet – unlike in the essays quoted above – not the positive ones but exaggerated versions of the worst. In such cases, Guatemala, which was to be a space of self-realization and authenticity, began to embody that from what the writer fled in 1948, in an even more annoying version. Guatemalans turned out to be laden with “a perpetual inferiority complex, laziness, lack of initiative and entrepreneurship.”²⁵ They transformed from internally free people into playful “*caballeros*” resolving problems with revolvers, hunting for sharks using machine guns, and rebelled against the elementary principles of order. Such a depreciation of Guatemala by its metaphorical identification with degraded postwar Europe was combined with the writer’s exaltation over the Guatemalan reality that took place by virtue of his putative prerogatives legitimized by his origin from old and unexpectedly good Europe.

Bobkowski made also several remarks on unstable Guatemalan political life. From the beginning of his stay in that country he was a witness of riots and revolts of different character and different number of casualties, but invariably he considered them an unserious grotesque, a tragicomic caricature of normal policy, in short: “an operetta.” The humorous descriptions of those events can be found especially in Bobkowski’s correspondence with his mother but appear in some of his essays as well. “Powieść meteorologiczna” [“Meteorological novel”], for example, a review of Michał Choromański’s novel, dedicated the lion’s share of its length not to the analysis of the novel but to the presentation of the tiny country of Guatemala resembling a dollhouse, childish run policy, miniature wars, and Guatemalans-

²³ See: A. S. Kowalczyk, “Bobkowski, Gwatemala i etos mieszczański,” in *Buntownik, cyklista, Kosmopolak. O Andrzeju Bobkowskim i jego twórczości*, ed. J. Klejnocki, A. S. Kowalczyk, Warsaw 2011, p. 197-213.

²⁴ J. Giedroyc, A. Bobkowski, *Listy 1946-1961*, p. 34, letter from 1.08.1948. The author’s emphasis. See also p. 667-668, letter from 21.11.1960.

²⁵ A. Bobkowski, “Z notatek modelarza,” in A. Bobkowski, *Z dziennika podróży*, Warsaw 2006, p. 144.

puppets that proceeded as if in a theater “with full gear of incredible phraseology and pathos.”²⁶ Having searched for the provenience of operetta-like politics in Central America, the writer found it in the Spanish influences and colonial heritage of the continent. He persuaded Turowicz: “All of them [Spanish conquistadors] wanted to be sovereign little kings [króliki].”²⁷ All of them had to cope with their compatriots’ conspiracies.... The conquest continues here. In default of space the government has taken its place.”²⁸ In a letter to his mother, the author added on the same topic:

These are seeds of Spanishness, seeds of incessant anarchy that is stuck in the soul of every Spanish, mixed with a desire to be rich, a boiling ambition and ambitions, and with a need to satisfy such desires by all means except for a regular job, a constructional and constructive consistency, which are typical for every so-called European.²⁹

Such assertions lead to a few interesting conclusions. Not only did Bobkowski see the negative, long-lasting consequences of Central America’s subordination to the colonial rule of the Spanish, the consequences that made him perceive Latinos with a sense of superiority. He also manifested antipathy and contempt towards the Spanish themselves. Beginning with his voyage on the *Jagiello* and then in Guatemala, the writer met many Spanish. He and his wife even enjoyed the hospitality of one of them right after their arrival, when they had not rented a flat yet. Nevertheless, his opinions on that national group were always of a deeply discriminatory character. “Russians are not Europeans, and neither are the Spanish,” this is what the author wrote to Giedroyc after observing his host for four days in July 1948. The statements that Spanish were not Europeans would be repeated refrain-like in Bobkowski’s correspondence with the editor in chief of the monthly *Kultura*. Their astonishing tacit sense was that Europe, rejected and abandoned with no regrets by the writer, out of the blue becomes a criterion of standard of civilization. Bobkowski, a detractor of exhaustion, passivity, and moral decline of the old continent, suddenly appear as an apologist of Europeaness.

Given Bobkowski’s hatred towards Communism, it is not surprising that the political phenomenon, which irritated him the most in Guatemala, was the spread of that ideology among Latinos. He compared Central America with “Sovietized Europe” but considered the

²⁶ A. Bobkowski, “Powieść meteorologiczna,” *Kultura* 1959 no 7, p. 202. The text is a review of Michał Choromański’s *Prolegomena do wszelkich nauk hermetycznych* (Warsaw 1958).

²⁷ An untranslatable wordplay: “królik” (pol.) means “rabbit” and “little king.”

²⁸ A. Bobkowski, *Listy do Jerzego Turowicza*, p. 69, letter from 18.07.1949.

²⁹ A. Bobkowski, *Listy z Gwatemali do matki*, p. 31, letter from 12.04.1949.

former more endangered because, according to his words, there, on that land of political children,³⁰ “the red ideology” merged with “colored racism.”³¹ Bobkowski explained this entanglement in a letter to his friend, Szymon Konarski:

I wouldn't be surprised if suddenly all over the so-called Latin mainland inhabitants and crossbreeds, so far counting proudly drops of white blood in their bodies and souls, suddenly began to count with pride quarts of colored blood. This infernal game between dull embodied nationalism and Communism has been already wreaking havoc here. All the more that they have as much to do with the Western culture, i.e. the culture *par excellence* of white man, as the price of tea in China.... After more than four years of living here I have to tell you that my views on the issue of race and so-called “colonialism” have undergone a radical transformation.³²

The direction of that transformation is surprising, considering the fact that Bobkowski was able to distance himself from the colonizing discourse, for his views evolved exactly into that what he called elsewhere “supreme remarks.”³³ Such remarks appeared, among others, in a diary *Z notatek modelarza* [*From the Modeler's Notes*] written by Bobkowski during the course of the Colonel Armas's crusade against Guatemalan Communists, in 1954. The text revealed a significant self-creation of the author as “a white man,” “a builder of the whole Western civilization.”³⁴ At the time of emergency, he felt authorized to take the lead of an armed group of “credulous” locals, as he is not a simple example of “one of two dozen of civilizations” but a representative of Europeaness presented as “something more that is worth defending because nothing of it is finished.”³⁵ Characterizing himself in such a way the writer seemed to dominate over “the wild world.” According to his own parallel, he was like the protagonist of Henryk Sienkiewicz's novel *W pustyni i w puszczy* [*In Desert and Wilderness*] Staś, who defended primitive black Kali, yet saw in his eyes nothing but “brown jungle.”³⁶

Interestingly, we come across similar protagonists in some of Bobkowski's “Guatemalan” short stories. Although, generally speaking, these protagonists discover the authenticity of life in active encounters with the Central American reality, sometimes

³⁰ “We, old Europeans, with all our painful and inhuman past, cannot have with them [Central Americans] a lot in common. ... Even in comparison to the [Northern] Americans they are children.” A. Bobkowski, *Listy z Gwatemali do matki*, p. 72, letter from 16.08.1951.

³¹ See: A. Bobkowski, “Z notatek modelarza,” p. 156-157.

³² “Listy Andrzeja Bobkowskiego do Szymona Konarskiego”, *Wiadomości* 1962, no 32-33, p. 4, letter from 18.12.1952.

³³ See: A. Bobkowski, “Powieść meteorologiczna,” p. 204.

³⁴ A. Bobkowski, “Z notatek modelarza,” p. 157.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

³⁶ *Ibid.* See also A. Bobkowski, “Powieść meteorologiczna,” p. 204.

unexpectedly, they distance themselves from it and begin to perceive it from the position taken by the author of *Z notatek modelarza* alike. For instance, one of the characters of Bobkowski's best known short story *Coco de oro*, Merling, who proudly tells his Polish friend "We are the West,"³⁷ saw America as a kind of blank slate, where only afterimages of European values become apparent. The most striking in this regard was an unfinished novel *Zmierzch [Twilight]*, the work which was interrupted by Bobkowski's untimely death in 1961. The protagonist of the novel, a Pole Jerzy, *porte-parole* of the author, recalled "his delightful breaking the fall and rising to the surface of half a dollar daily rate" almost entirely in the style of colonizers. Feeling a winner, he literally used terms taken from the colonial vocabulary to describe his experience: "A method of conquistadors. I didn't hide in front of myself that I was moving forward conquest-like."³⁸

Coco de oro and *Zmierzch* are works of fiction, but on the literary level they meaningfully repeat the way of self-understanding Bobkowski willy-nilly recorded in some of his diaries and letters created in Guatemala. On the one hand, having adapted the image of the New World to his life project analyzed above, he perceived that world as a better Europe, a land where true European values still made themselves felt. On the other hand, he assigned Central America features that were in acute contradiction with such an image. Namely, he suggested that if America resembled Europe, it was equally bad or worse than the prototype because degraded additionally by "the colored wiliness"³⁹ of its dwellers. He considered himself a representative of the old, almost squandered but invaluable culture and civilization, which according to him "is the work of white man and nothing can help it, whether one is a racist or not."⁴⁰ As a result, his conclusions turn out to be indeed racist. Here is yet another example.

One local guy rightly said that the only solution for these countries would be a purchase of greater amount of old ships, loading all Indians, crossbreeds, submerging them in the sea and bringing Europeans. ... Here, in these countries, two cardinal mistakes have their painful consequence: first, that the Spanish did not slaughter all Indians and second, that then no one exterminated the Spanish.⁴¹

This is what Bobkowski wrote to his brother-in-law, Jan Birtus, irritated by the lack of Guatemalans' resistance to spreading Communism, in 1950. Three days later in a letter to

³⁷ A. Bobkowski, "Coco de oro," in A. Bobkowski, *Coco de oro*, p. 105.

³⁸ A. Bobkowski, "Zmierzch," in A. Bobkowski, *Zmierzch i inne opowiadania*, Warsaw 2007, p. 108.

³⁹ A. Bobkowski, "Z notatek modelarza," p. 143.

⁴⁰ A. Bobkowski, *Listy do Aleksandra Bobkowskiego 1940-1961*, p. 94, letter from 21.04. 1959.

⁴¹ A. Bobkowski, *Ikkos i Sotion*, p. 76, letter from 23.07.1950.

Giedroyc he repeated that comment almost word for word and added an outrageous conclusion: “As a result of those mistakes, there are millions of ... incurable ‘rasta’ of the despicable sort, with whom I don’t know what to do. The only way out is to have them by the short and curlies.”⁴² To have the inhabitants of “the country of quetzal,” and other Latinos, by the short and curlies, suggested the writer who simultaneously thought about himself: “I am a quetzal.”

A look from the top drawer

With no doubt, there is a considerable aporia included in the “Guatemalan” work of Bobkowski. However, one of his texts, if does not tackle that aporia, illuminates it to a certain extent. In a letter to Aniela Mieczysławska, a Polish activist in exile and one of Bobkowski’s closest friend, the writer admitted: “I was leaving [France] because I felt disgust, because I felt that I will be a pariah there again, *sale étranger*. And here [in Guatemala] they can hate me but I am a sahib, a white, for whom they have respect – here I am from the top drawer.”⁴³ Characterizing himself, the author used the word “sahib” of Arabic origin that means “holder,” “master,” or “owner” and was commonly used in the Indian sub-continent in colonial times as a courteous term for European. Simultaneously he talked about Guatemalans, presented impersonally as a mass, with a sense of protectionism and paternalism, as befitted a sahib. “And to show them some attention, that a man doesn’t feel better than they are, then they respect him twice, then such specimens are ennobled by a relationship with him and feel proud of it,”⁴⁴ the author continued in the letter. The second excerpt indicated that despite his overt intention Bobkowski involuntarily regarded himself as someone better than locals, as in his optics maintaining relationships with Latinos and treating them as equals meant doing them a kind of favor.

Without deeper interpretation of the letter to Mieczysławska one could conclude that Bobkowski simply took the condescending superior position of a white man and European towards non-Europeans of a different race and unlike cultural and civilizational standards. However, apart from the word “sahib” with respect to relationships with Latinos, the author used the words “pariah” and “*sale étranger*,” i.e. “dirty foreigner,” to specify feelings he had once in France. He also added a sentence that revealed a tacit sense of the prior argumentation

⁴² J. Giedroyc, A. Bobkowski, *Listy 1946-1961*, p. 136-137, letter form 26.07.1950.

⁴³ A. Bobkowski, A. Mieczysławska, *Listy 1951-1961*, ed. A. S. Kowalczyk, Warsaw 2010, p. 163-164, letter from 6.04.1960.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 164.

from the letter. After a suggestion that social contacts between Latinos and Europeans elevated the former, while the latter – not necessarily, the author asked rhetorically: “Which French or English is proud of friendship with a Pole? On the contrary.”⁴⁵ This was not a statement of sahib, but of a subordinated subject. Bobkowski as such a subject not only suffered German humiliations in the time of the Second World War that he spent in France, humiliations to a considerable extent shared by him with the whole French population. He also had a firsthand experience of the Western orientaling practices towards the land that the West, at least since the Enlightenment, had regarded as Eastern Europe. Bobkowski seemed to be aware that Eastern Europe’s ambiguous location, as Larry Wolff, an expert in the topic, said, “within Europe but not fully European,”⁴⁶ had let the Westerners associate this part of the continent with backwardness and barbarism. What is more, he knew very well that Eastern Europe, after the Second World War, found themselves in the Soviet sphere where Communist parties, licensed by Moscow, were seeking to assume totalitarian control. At the same time the West hypocritically accepted, justified, even enforced the increasing separation of the East behind the Iron Curtain. The post-Yalta history of Eastern Europe, which ensued directly from the agreement of the Big Three and indirectly, among others, from the image of the macro-region as non-Europe in the European bosom, so that history could make an Eastern European cry; and indeed, Bobkowski cried, already in August 1944, during the liberation of Paris because he foresaw that the forthcoming “liberation” of Eastern Europe by the Red Army would be the beginning of its new subordination and further degradation.⁴⁷ In 1960, referring to his French experience in the 1940s, he used the words “pariah” and “*sale étranger*” in his auto-characteristics to underscore that being from Eastern Europe still did not give a sense of comfort in Western Europe. The latter perceived the former as worse, other barely-Europe, the origin from which was hardly a reason to be proud.

Given the writer’s reasoning from the letter to Mieczysławska, his choice of Central America gained new motives going beyond his existential project of living authentic life in a land of freedom. For Bobkowski, an Eastern European, America appeared a space of (almost) equal chances for all white people. He discovered that there was scarcely a difference between Eastern and Western European in the American reality because it rewarded for nothing but the light color of skin. Due to acts of othering manifested by the writer towards Latinos, he could

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ L. Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, Stanford 1994, p. 11.

⁴⁷ See: A. Bobkowski, *Szkice piórkiem*, Warsaw 2007, p. 540.

understand and present himself as “a white,” “a sahib,” and thus finally achieve a status of simply European, not of worse or better type. Strikingly, an analogous case of othering made itself visible in a drama *Czarny piasek* [*Black sand*] published by Bobkowski in 1959. The protagonist of the drama, Herman Rosenberg, although designed by the author as one of those who began a new life in Central America after the war, in the eyes of reader turned out to be a racist burdened with a complex of his Semitic origin. He maintained a sexual relationship with a Latinized Indian, disregarding her at the same time, and explained it as follows: “You know why I’m living with this Rosario?... I am living with her, because she doesn’t even know what it means Jew (with delight...).... When she passes by a synagogue, she crosses herself, as in the front of a church.”⁴⁸ In the case of Rosenberg and Bobkowski alike the fundamental difference of their race, valorized higher than the race of locals, virtually invalidated minor (at least in America) differences such as Jewish confession or coming from a second-class part of the European mainland. Therefore, for both of them living over the ocean has a compensatory dimension. They only do not notice that they gain the compensation imposing the role of the Other on Latinos; the same role they were playing in Europe themselves.

Conclusions

How to judge the “Guatemalan” work of Bobkowski with its ambiguous, difficult to disentangle senses? Through the prism of historical relativism, it may seem the manifestation of the only optics available to the writer. After all, Bobkowski was a child of his time, with all the restrictions ensuing from this condition. Presumably, manifesting a patronizing superiority towards Latinos was the most obvious form of attitude towards those people for a man born in Europe in the 1910s, educated there in the interwar period, and, after the Second World War spent in Western Europe, moved – willingly – to Central America. Looking at the problem from this perspective, one can risk a hypothesis that it was nothing but the writer’s cultural and intellectual formation that made him stick to the stereotypical opinions on the character of Latinos as allegedly passive in entrepreneurship and impetuous in emotions. Bobkowski proved not to look for that what was unique and untranslatable into European categories in the inhabitants of America. Regardless of that he was perceptive and had undeniable analytical abilities, he apparently could not help confronting those people with values known from Europe, and judging them according to alien, non-American standards. It may be the reason

⁴⁸ A. Bobkowski, “Czarny piasek. Sztuka w trzech aktach,” *Kultura* 1959, no 11, p. 61.

why despite thirteen years of living in Guatemala he did not exceed the horizon designated by Keyserling in *Meditations* and after reading *Nostramo* by Joseph Conrad he considered it the best analysis of the Latinos' nature.⁴⁹

However, considering present-day sensibility largely shaped by postcolonial studies, it is difficult to defend Bobkowski against a charge of racist thinking or at least colonial mentality in the nineteenth-century style. Using the famous words of Homi Bhabha, one can reliably say that "Guatemalan" work of the writer is penetrated by "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, **as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite.**"⁵⁰ Bobkowski's discourse aimed at linking Central America and Latinos with Europe and its representatives but not to such an extent, so that the former equaled the latter. Therefore, the discourse in question confirms and establishes, not cancels, the difference between Europeans and Central Americans regardless of the fact that the latter have gained some access to the culture and civilization of the former. The writer's desire of Latino-the Other was strengthened by the circumstance that Bobkowski himself had been an object of othering in Western Europe. Having come from the country that experienced many forms of denied sovereignty and different variants of orientalizing, he found Guatemala a suitable ground for compensation of his second-class European complex. The writer's correspondence proves that it was one of important reasons why he appreciated his "second homeland." "America is a different world, the world that a man can love with all his heart and be happy that he will die here, not in that European shit, not in that French or English snot,"⁵¹ Bobkowski wrote to Mieczysławska. No matter, thus, how much he wanted to be authentic in a gesture of breaking up with Europe and encounters with American reality, he remained a European, or precisely speaking an Eastern European who perceived Latinos through an analogous "lessening glass" that once had been used to take a look on himself. In his need of escapism from the old continent he somehow followed Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Gauguin or Jacques Brel. Much more, however, he resembled Adam Mickiewicz, a citizen of Russian Poland, banished to Central

⁴⁹ Bobkowski read *Nostramo* due to Giedroyc who had sent him the book, in 1959. See: J. Giedroyc, A. Bobkowski, *Listy 1946-1961*, p. 608-609, letter from 15.11.1959. Bobkowski expressed his opinion on Conrad's novel in an essay "Biografia wielkiego Kosmopolaka" ["The biography of a great Cosmo-Polish"], in A. Bobkowski, *Coco de oro*, p. 239-253. On the postcolonial interpretation of Conrad's writing see e.g. Ch. Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," *Massachusetts Review* 1977, no 18 (rpt. in J. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, London, 1988, p. 251-261); T. Collits, *Postcolonial Conrad: Paradoxes of Empire*, Abington, New York 1995; R. Hampson, "Joseph Conrad: Postcolonialism and Imperialism," *EurAmerica* 2011, vol. 41, no. 1, 03, p. 1-46; D. Vogel, "Joseph Conrad in the Light of Postcolonialism," *Yearbook of Conrad Studies* 2012, vol. VII, p. 97-112.

⁵⁰ H. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London, New York 2004, p. 86.

⁵¹ A. Bobkowski, A. Mieczysławska, *Listy 1951-1961*, p. 164, letter from 6.04.1960.

Russia for his political activities, who had captured the exotic atmosphere of his journey to Crimea in *Sonety krymskie* [*Sonnets from the Crimea*] (1826). In one of the poems Mickiewicz immortalized the oriental atmosphere of the former capital of the Crimean Khanate where “Heaven’s harem greets its star array.”⁵² Strikingly, when Bobkowski was describing “exotic,” it is his epithet, Guatemala Ciudad under the starry sky, he summed up, having used the title of that same poem: “In general, Bakhchysarai by night.”⁵³

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⁵² A. Mickiewicz, “Baktshi Serai by night,” in A. Mickiewicz, *Sonnets from the Crimea*, trans. Edna Worthley Underwood, San Francisco 1917, p. 11. On the postcolonial interpretation of *Sonnets from the Crimea* see: D. Skórczewski, *Teoria – literatura – dyskurs: Pejzaż postkolonialny*, Lublin 2013, p. 221-245.

⁵³ A. Bobkowski, *Listy do Jerzego Turowicza 1947-1960*, p. 89, letter from 24.04.1950. See: “Bakhchysarai at night,” in A. Mickiewicz, *Sonnets from the Crimea*, San Francisco 1917.

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