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## Where Is Piotr Niewiadomski Headed? The Protagonist of *The Salt of the Earth* in a Mythic-Ritual Context<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** The author returns to *The Salt of the Earth* conceived in the mythic-ritual context. She presents characteristic elements of the plot that allow us to interpret the fortunes of the main character through the prism of the initiation ritual. However, what she proposes differs from previous interpretations of the novel. She concludes that by using the poetics of myth and the initiation model the author not only demythologizes war, but also presents a diagnosis of the situation of European civilization on the eve of the cataclysm of World War II. Wittlin also passes judgment on fascination with the primeval myth, as well as on simplistic concepts of the return to a state of unblemished nature, which was supposed to be an antidote to the civilizational threats of the time.

The author also contemplates the meaning of the presentation of the protagonist of the novel, Piotr Niewiadomski, as an innocent simpleton. By using the context of the initiation ritual, we can understand Niewiadomski's journey as a path to recognizing one's situation in the world leading to rebellion but culminating in cognition and self-awareness. However, the novel's protagonist does not fully achieve these aims. He remains a person who is incapable of carrying knowledge about the world and about conscious participation. Therefore, in *The Salt of the Earth* Wittlin poses a question about the responsibility all of us bear for evil, including that resulting from simplifications and from mythologization.

**Keywords:** Józef Wittlin, *The Salt of the Earth*, mythic-ritual context, initiation ritual

Who is Piotr Niewiadomski? It would seem that since the initial publication of Józef Wittlin's novel in 1935, the answer to this question has been defined rather precisely. Critics have described its protagonist as an illiterate simpleton who is especially sensitive and innocent,<sup>2</sup> but they have also considered

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<sup>2</sup> E. Wiegandt, "Wstęp" [in:] J. Wittlin, *Sól ziemi*, Wrocław 1991, p. LVI.

him to be a representative symbol of a man of his age<sup>3</sup> as well as the personification of pure and natural humanity;<sup>4</sup> they have considered him to be an everyman.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps most interesting is Zoya Yurieff's contestation that Piotr is "a mirror that faithfully reflects the chaos of a world descending into the madness of world war."<sup>6</sup> However, what does this mirror show? All critics have emphasized the innocence of this character. In contrast, I would like to pose the question of whether Józef Wittlin's intention really was to present Piotr as so absolutely innocent. Is he "the salt of the earth"? If so, what does that metaphor mean?

Much has also been said on the topic of the mythic-ritual context; Ewa Wiegandt's comments are especially interesting. Today, it is difficult to contest her proposal: Wiegandt considers *The Salt of the Earth* to be a mythographic novel, accurately recognizing similarities between Wittlin's novel and the poetics of myth.<sup>7</sup> In a lengthy publication devoted to expressionism in Wittlin's prose, Krystyna Jakowska wrote about three types of stylization: fable-like, religious, and that of an ancient epic serving to mythologize the world.<sup>8</sup> She discovered a mythicizing perspective in the image of war, noting a mythic-ritual model in Piotr Niewiadomski's fortunes. It seems, then, that not much can be added here. However, despite my reservations, I would like to propose we look at the mythic-ritual models one more time, despite their obviousness.

Making use of the poetics of myth<sup>9</sup> and the initiation model, Wittlin does more than just demythologize war and expose the fatal consequences of succumbing to its demonic power. The writer's intentions go further, moving towards a diagnosis of the situation of European civilization on the eve of catastrophe. In spite of appearances, Wittlin passes judgment on fascination with the primeval myth, and also on simplistic concepts of the return to a state

<sup>3</sup> See the opinions of critics as summarized by K. Jakowska (*Z dziejów ekspresjonizmu w Polsce. Wokół „Soli ziemi”*, Wrocław 1977, p. 133) as well as her own opinions (p. 138).

<sup>4</sup> L. Fryde, "O prozie Wittlin" [in:] idem, *Wybór pism krytycznych*, ed. A. Biernacki, Warszawa 1966, p. 401.

<sup>5</sup> Z. Yurieff, *Józef Wittlin*, trans. M. Szczubiałka, Warszawa 1997, p. 70.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 71.

<sup>7</sup> E. Wiegandt, op. cit., pp. XLVII–LXXVIII, esp. pp. LV–LVI, LXIX.

<sup>8</sup> K. Jakowska, op. cit., p. 165.

<sup>9</sup> Speaking most generally, the use of the poetics of myth means the construction of a world in the presented work of literature using structures characteristic of a mythical tale. Usually, this pertains to such categories as time and space; it is reflected in adding a symbolic dimension to various events, in referring to mythical scenarios, and in the applying the rules of so-called mythical thinking (E. Cassirer). This topic was discussed in detail in E. Mielecinski's book *The Poetics of Myth*, New York–London 2000. Examples of the use of the poetics of myth in Polish literature are described, for example, by: B. Kaniewska, "O sposobach i funkcjach mityzacji. Nowak – Myśliwski – Redliński," *Pamiętnik Literacki* 1990, vol. 3; T. Mizerkiewicz, *Stylizacje mityczne w prozie polskiej po 1968 roku*, Poznań 2001; *Mity, mitologie, mityzacje nie tylko w literaturze*, ed. L. Wiśniewska, Bydgoszcz 2005; and also D. Siwor, *W kręgu mitu, magii i rytuału. O prozie Tadeusza Nowaka*, Kraków 2002.

of unblemished nature, which was supposed to be an antidote to the threats to civilization of the time. The author of *Orfeusz w piekle XX wieku* (“Orpheus in the Hell of the Twentieth Century”) considered his vocation as a writer to consist not only of the pursuit of solely artistic aims (although Orpheus in the titular essay is the one who offers man respite in art);<sup>10</sup> above all, he had ethical aims. This attitude is ostensibly anachronistic, but it is not limited to mundane activity related to politics or social interventionism. Rather, such an approach above all requires one to seek truth, which, as a basic human need, has survived the era of post-modernism.<sup>11</sup> The title that Wittlin gave to his essay collection emphatically attests to this. It refers to the symbolic meaning contained in a mythic tale and points towards the role of an artist who wants to save truth, goodness, and beauty from the abyss of history. This does not mean that Wittlin naively believed in the possibility of living out this intention; thus, his conviction essentially possesses a deeply tragic trait, and the tasks that he placed before himself take on heroic qualities. Despite his declaration of faith, Wittlin was a writer who was probably free of any illusions concerning human nature and was aware of the non-negotiable existence of evil in the world. This makes the writer’s responsibility for the word, which should not, willfully or involuntarily, cause suffering, cruelty, or harm, all the greater.<sup>12</sup> Literature did not save humanity from the hell of the twentieth century. Instead, its duty is to present to man the truth about the times in which he lives, not about himself. Wittlin appears to particularly value an uncompromising approach to this topic, which is evident, for example, in the essay *Apologia Gombrowicza* (“A Defense of Gombrowicz,” OWP, pp. 592–602).

A digression concerning Wittlin’s concept of the role of the writer is essential here, as I believe that it is related to the use of the initiation model and its symbolism. The meaning of initiation, especially in Jung’s and Eliade’s

<sup>10</sup> J. Wittlin, *Orfeusz w piekle XX wieku*, Kraków 2000, pp. 424–429. Further quotations from this edition are marked by the abbreviation OWP and contain page numbers.

<sup>11</sup> This is how Józef Olejniczak interprets Wittlin’s understanding of the duties of the writer in his essay “Między ‘Pan jest literat’ a ‘jestem tylko pisarzem.’ O powinnościach i zobowiązaniach literatury w eseistyce Józefa Wittlina” (“Between ‘You Are a Man of Letters’ and ‘I Am Only a Writer’: On the Duties and Responsibilities in Józef Wittlin’s Essays”) [in:] *Prace Naukowe Uniwersytetu Śląskiego w Katowicach*, ed. I. Opacki, Katowice 1990, p. 76. Stanisław Gębala also wrote about this in his essay “Odpowiedzialność za słowo. (O eseistyce Józefa Wittlina)” (“Responsibility for the Word: On Józef Wittlin’s Essays”), *Ruch Literacki* 1985, vol. 2; reprint: S. Gębala, *Odpowiedzialność za słowo (felietony i szkice)*, Bielsko-Biała 1993.

<sup>12</sup> This is pointedly expressed in the essay *Pisma pośmiertne* (“Post-Mortem Writings”): “Over the course of so many years, under the influence of the ‘ideal of post-mortem writings,’ I have developed a fairly obstinate imperative, demanding carefulness in shaping opinions, even in the construction of sentences and composition of images. This is as if these sentences and images were to exist independently of my fate on earth and independently of my relationships with people. This is as if my life were to end right after I will have finished my writings” (OWP, p. 712).

understanding of the term, culminates in the attainment of self-knowledge, in the awareness of one's "I" and of one's place in the world.<sup>13</sup> Piotr Niewiadomski does not only experience initiation into the world of war; he is also forced to abandon his place. The ontological order in which he had hitherto persisted also changes. His journey is, perhaps above all, a journey of initiation understood as the attainment of truth, self-awareness, and encounter. Whether or not he achieves this aim is a separate matter. I am interested in two matters related to the use of the *rites de passages* model. The first are the initiation-related aspects of Piotr's fortunes as a path that first leads to rebellion against the recognized order of the world and culminates in self-knowledge and responsibility, and the second is the possibility of Wittlin's contestation of the primeval myth that is contrasted with civilization.

Let us start with the beginning of the main part of the novel, leaving the *Prologue* aside. I have referenced this quotation because the description of place is of essential significance to my argument:

Into distant, forgotten corners of the Hutsul country – filled with the aroma of mint on summer evenings, sleepy villages nestling in quiet pastures where shepherds play their long wooden horns – comes the intruding railway. It is the only connection these godforsaken parts have with the outside world. It pierces the night's darkness with the colored lights of its signals, violating the silence, violating the immaculacy of the profound night-time peacefulness. The din of its illuminated carriages rends the darkness's membrane. A long-drawn-out whistle blast awakens hares from their slumber and arouses people's drowsy curiosity. Like a great iron ladder nailed down onto the stony ground, shiny black rails on wooden sleepers stretch from one infinity towards another. Little white station buildings surrounded by hedges, vegetable plots, gazebos and flower-beds with colored glass orbs on white-painted sticks, numerous little iron bridges crossing streams and countless small signal boxes give the lie to any impression that this part of the country was totally God-forsaken (*The Salt of the Earth*, trans. P.J. Corness, London 2018, p. 43).

<sup>13</sup> As is known, initiation is a ritual of transformation or the transition from one state to another. From a social perspective, it means the change of one's status within a collective group, but the meaning of initiation was never limited to this. The transformation is above all related to awareness: experiences that encompass encounter with the sacred, but also one's attitudes towards history and tradition, as well as those that lead towards encounter in reference both to the world and to one's own self. The retreat from adolescence (also understood in a broader sense) is conditional on this. Here, it is worth mentioning several prominent works related to the large body of literature on this topic: B. Bettelheim, *Symbolic Wounds: Puberty Rites and the Envious Male*, New York 1962; M. Buchowski, *Magia i rytuał*, Warszawa 1993; M. Eliade, *Initiation, rites, sociétés secrètes*, Paris 1992; B. Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*, Long Grove 1992.

The style here is clear; the land that will be discussed is presented as an Arcadian oasis of quiet, calm, and innocence. The imagery that is evoked with the use of pastoral symbolism (shepherds, aromas, the aura of sleep, etc.) emphasizes that we are dealing with a paradisiacal land untouched by sin that is both somewhat infantile and, more significantly, naive.<sup>14</sup> The description in the quoted fragment explicitly juxtaposes Hutsul country presented as such with civilization, which comes from “the world,” from the outside, and is symbolized by the railway, which is synonymous with progress and technology. However, it is also marked by violence, as expressed in the following characteristic phrases: “violating the silence,” “the din of its illuminated carriages,” and “rends the darkness’s membrane.” I emphasize this because the conditions necessary for the interpretation I would like to propose are already evident in this first fragment. The presented site is the birthplace of the novel’s protagonist, Piotr Niewiadomski, a character first introduced to the reader immediately after the above-quoted description. As we know, he will have to abandon his place in the world in order to go to war. This journey will bear the marks of a transformation, of Piotr transforming from a civilian to a soldier consisting of “a tunic, trousers, an overcoat, boots, a rifle...” (*The Salt of the Earth*, p. 301). An effect of these characteristic words is that initiation into the world of war was interpreted as synonymous with reification; moreover, we can find many fragments similar to this one in the novel. However, objectification is not the only kind of transformation that the novel’s narrator experiences.

Niewiadomski leaves the land of his childhood, which is presented as paradisiacal and thus treated by him as a world that is orderly and harmonious. Piotr has a clearly defined conception of the world, in whose hierarchy God and the emperor come first, and in which people’s obligations and life goals have been determined. The protagonist himself dreams of donning a railway man’s cap, a symbol of advancement and a worthy place in his society. At the same time, the uniform, of which the cap is a part, signifies that the person wearing it belongs to the emperor. The war intrudes into such ordered perceptions and hopes. The point of departure and subsequent phases of Piotr’s experiences allow us to discern the elements of a journey of initiation in his story, especially since they are accompanied by ritualized gestures and actions. Because the protagonist of *The Salt of the Earth* faces the necessity of leaving his home to go to war, Ewa Wiegandt has proposed comparing his journey to Homer’s *Odyssey*. The allusion to the story of Odysseus is legitimized, perhaps above all, by Wittlin’s own interests.<sup>15</sup> However, the meaning of Homer’s epic poem points in a different direction. Meanwhile, the *rites de passages* model emphasizes showing the protagonist undergoing a certain

<sup>14</sup> Diminutives play an important role in giving such a nature to the description.

<sup>15</sup> Wittlin translated the *Odyssey* into Polish. He returned to this work many times after the publication of the first version of his translation in 1924.

transition, especially a transition from childhood to adulthood. In a biological sense, Piotr is an adult. However, his consciousness is reminiscent of a child's point-of-view; this is evident, for example, in the literal way in which he interprets abstract concepts, his magical thinking, and his interpretation of natural phenomena as the effects of his own behavior. Naturally, the construction of the protagonist's psyche should not be examined using the categories of realistic conventions. Wittlin himself opposed attempts at interpreting this character as the literal reflection of the worldview of a person shaped within the framework of rather primitive social structures.

In a letter to Karol Wiktor Zawodziński, the author of *The Salt of the Earth* wrote that Niewiadomski does not represent an "everyday person." He describes the protagonist of the novel as follows:

Niewiadomski is not a typical representative of some segment of humanity, just as Charlie Chaplin is not a typical American tramp. I wanted Piotr Niewiadomski to be something like Chaplin during the Great War.<sup>16</sup>

The author's words confirm his attempt to symbolically, not realistically, present the novel's protagonist as possessing traits that are ordinary, yet reflected in a distinctive, individual fate. Thus, the reference to the poetics of myth seems especially well founded. However, I cannot fully agree with the notion that Niewiadomski is an everyman. He is not "every" person in the full

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<sup>16</sup> Józef Wittlin's letter to Karol Wiktor Zawodziński, dated March 16, 1937 ("Trzy listy Józefa Wittlina," ed. P. Kądziała, *Przegląd Powszechny* 1987, no. 1, pp. 31–32).

Wittlin also devoted several important sentences to Chaplin in the 1936 essay *Droga w „świat”* ("The Road to 'the World'"), which was later published in the volume *Orfeusz w piekle XX wieku* ("Orpheus in the Hell of the Twentieth Century"). Wittlin recalls watching the film *Modern Times* and symbolically ties this fact to the occupation of the Rhineland by the Third Reich's army. Chaplin first appears to the writer as a symbol of opposition to evil forces in the name of "the weak and poor of this world." The author of *The Salt of the Earth* is on the same side, writing that he does not want to hear "the rumble of tanks that will crush those who are like Chaplin, those who are like me." At the same time, he feels responsible for the world and is aware of the fact that the end of European civilization as it has always been known is looming. Despite the obvious helplessness, Wittlin feels like he is an accomplice. This oscillation between desiring to avoid images auguring the victory of violence and feeling the necessity to protest against evil is interesting. One can get the impression that Wittlin is critical of the lack of efforts to stop fascism, although of course he is aware of the negligible effectiveness of individual acts of protest. By comparing this fragment of the essay and the statement in the letter to Zawodziński, we can conclude that we are dealing with a certain parallel: Chaplin – Wittlin; Chaplin – Niewiadomski. This similarity concerns one aspect of the nature of these persons. Their common trait is helplessness and subjection to the machine of history on the one hand, and at the same time an attempt at opposing them. The argument presented in my essay will lead to conclusions interpreting the meaning of the persona of the protagonist of *The Salt of the Earth* in this context as well.

See: J. Wittlin, "Droga w 'świat'" [in:] idem, *Orfeusz w piekle XX wieku*, op. cit., pp. 280–281.

meaning of that word, as it is difficult to consider him to be a representative of all people. Instead, he seems to be the personification of a certain attitude towards the world. Perhaps what Piotr Niewiadomski shares with the everyman is the necessity of evaluating what is good and what is evil, as well as the fact that he is under the influence of forces he has no control over. Since the author himself compares Niewiadomski to Charlie Chaplin, it is necessary to note the characteristic traits of his character, who is intended to be grotesque and is treated somewhat ironically. Chaplin is likeable, but he also arouses pity, because he cannot move around in this world, lacks knowledge, and can be pathetic. Perhaps that is how the last name of the protagonist of *The Salt of the Earth* should be interpreted. In Polish, *Niewiadomski* [literally, “the unknown one” – translator’s note] is not only someone of unknown origin (N. N.), but also the one who “does not know.” He does not understand the world and does not recognize the true meaning of events. That is how Piotr is presented in a large part of the novel, before he begins to ask questions and rebel against the laws that reality imposes upon him. The initiatory significance of Piotr’s journey is moving from “I don’t know” to “I know.” In this sense, he may have much in common with the everyman. However, as is the case with other *topos*, models, and motifs, the author’s strategy consists of making use of a given element in order to polemically modify it.

Let us return to the initiation ritual. As I have already noted, the subsequent phases of the protagonist’s initiation into the world of war are of a ritualized nature, beginning with the obligation to stand before the recruiting commission, which is compared to the Final Judgment. The strict order of action and the hierarchization and sacralization of the commanding authority add a ritualistic dimension to the scene. Naturally, language plays a decisive role here:

Some magic spell or charm appeared to watch over the clothes abandoned by their owners, rendering them untouchable, taboo. It was as if the souls of the owners remained in those shirts, trousers and shoes, while their bodies were being judged by the recruiting committee (*The Salt of the Earth*, p. 85).

The comparison to the Final Judgment is bolstered by Biblical stylization. The episode in which the protagonist waits before the commission is also distinguished by the change in the scale of values that is characteristic of a ritual. It is turned on its head, just like during any holiday, just like during carnival, when what had hitherto been a value (in this case, one’s health) in ordinary times becomes something undesirable, something bringing one closer to death. The ritual of the initial inclusion of Piotr among the people involved in the war ends with an oath, an essential element of change. Taken before God and emperor, it seals the sacral dimension of the annexation that takes place.

Applying the analogy to the initiation ritual, in these scenes we can see the equivalent of removing an individual from a previous group (here, it is the local civilian community of the county of Śniatyn) and adding him into a new one (that of future soldiers going to the garrison for training). More importantly, the descriptions of the ritualized acts and behaviors clearly underscore the fact that the pattern of operations has been imposed externally; Piotr does not participate in them voluntarily. The protagonist is passive and is subject to what has been violently assigned to him. This differentiates the situation from rituals in archaic societies. A participant in such rituals may not have entirely understood the symbolic meaning of individual elements of the rite, and may not have had any impact on them because they were strictly designated by tradition. However, he or she accepted them. They were an obvious part of the order of the world with which the initiated individual identified. The ritual helped him or her to understand him or herself and the world. Meanwhile, Niewiadomski is subjected to his ritual in spite of himself; he does not comprehend the meaning of the events that are occurring around him. He is lost, and what gradually happens to him leads to an increasing (although temporary) desire for rebellion. The state of Piotr's spirit is described, for example, in the scene in which he stands before the army commission. He feels internal resistance to the recruitment procedure (*The Salt of the Earth*, pp. 103–104). The discrepancy between the initiation process in its model form and its realization in the novel is clearly emphasized here. Wittlin evokes characteristic elements of a rite, but he modifies them, creating meaning that is essential to interpreting the whole. It is assumed that initiation leads to self-knowledge, and this process does begin in the consciousness of the protagonist of *The Salt of the Earth*. However, the initiation model assumes the subjection of the participant in the ritual to defined dictates, in part so that one can become a full-fledged member of the community, put the vision of the world in order, and come to know oneself and the entire universe, which is meant to lead to harmonious participation in the fullness of Being. In Piotr's case, this will happen in a different way. Rebellion foreshadows the process of independent thinking, but it does not bring effects that are characteristic of a ritual.

The subsequent phases of Niewiadomski's fortunes have been shaped in such a way as to emphasize the similarities to the ritual of initiation and, at the same time, expose discrepancies. The protagonist's journey to a place that belongs to the sphere of war as an institution has the elements of a trial, as does the time spent in the garrison. Leaving his own place, Piotr gradually enters into a foreign world and comes to know its laws; he must deal with them and fulfill the tasks presented to him. The description of this transformation is accompanied by numerous episodes marking changes in the surrounding reality. Above all, in Piotr's eyes, war is a supernatural phenomenon and consequently has the power to rule over the order of nature: "Such



a commotion, such a row had erupted here, regardless of the night-time hour! This was not night-time; the war had abolished night-time – it was broad daylight. From all sides the Hutsuls were inundated with torrid Hungarian speech” (*The Salt of the Earth*, p. 207).

Not only is the order of nature challenged, but so is the basic differentiation between what is one’s own and what is someone else’s, or between what is comprehensible and what is not. Piotr is surprised that he cannot understand the Hungarians, for example, although they are soldiers and subjects of the emperor just like he is. Basic actions and gestures are called into question; the thirsty travelers cannot drink; they do not understand the “Magyar” language; they incorrectly interpret its prohibitions. The description of Piotr’s dream contains a comparison of these linguistic challenges to the Tower of Babel. However, this chaos becomes the order of war, its hierarchy that prevails over everything else, and its distinct laws of time. Dominant are the experience of foreignness and the need to once again systematize the world. However, unlike in initiation, the foreignness is not overcome. Piotr learns the laws of war and complies with them, but they do not become his own nor something that he accepts.

The stay in the garrison is a transitional phase of the initiation process. It is an isolated place in a unique location (between the abattoir and the cemetery); it is a designated space where the ultimate transformation will take place. The sight of a marching battalion augurs this new reality:

Once again the steady tread of hobnailed boots was heard, trampling, trampling the foreign soil, as if wanting to trample to death every last blade of grass. For several minutes, this entire resounding wall of uniforms passed before the dumbfounded Hutsuls. Everyone began to realize that behind this rhythmic display of hobnailed boots lay a deep hidden meaning, something inhuman, even though it was produced by human feet. The beauty of the march was out of this world. Some invisible forces were at work here, probably the same ones that generate electric light and the power that drives distilling machines. People were marching, but they were not people. And it seemed that even the magician himself, Lieutenant Smekal with his short legs, was nothing but a tool of these invisible forces, obediently carrying out their will (*The Salt of the Earth*, p. 220).

The above fragment emphatically shows the sacralization of war from the narrator’s perspective. He has the impression that he is participating in the exceptional mystery of a supernatural force that is inconceivable but simultaneously fascinating. At the same time, the narrator’s ironic distance, which appears in the language of the description, is clearly visible.<sup>17</sup> Reality

<sup>17</sup> W. S. Wołcław has devoted much attention to the topic of irony in *The Salt of the Earth* in: “W żywiole ironii... O bohaterach *Soli ziemi* Józefa Wittlina,” *Konteksty Kultury* 2011, no. 7,

is constantly presented from a dual perspective: from the protagonist's point-of-view and from that of the author. Hence, on the one hand, the ritual bolsters the effect of the sacralization of the war and, on the other, unmasks the mechanism of these events and their true meaning.

The location of the garrison between the abattoir and the cemetery plays important role in the realization of the initiation ritual, as both places are related to death. One should not forget what the emperor's subjects prepare for here: they are to become tools and, at the same time, "the material of death." This is a caricatural exposition of one of the fundamental functions of an initiation ritual, which is to familiarize one with death, while simultaneously leading one to the fullness of life.

Another key scene in *The Salt of the Earth* is that of the ritual bath preceding putting on the uniform, which is the war's ultimate annexation of Piotr. Like everything in the garrison, the visit to the bathhouse is described as an experience that is new and incomprehensible, and therefore demonic, to Niewiadomski. The narrator underscores the experience of foreignness, as well as Piotr's conviction about fate's inevitability. In this scene, an ordinary shower appears to result from supernatural forces; water seems to flow from above as though an act of the devil. This connection between war and satanic forces is consistently present from the beginning of the novel, from the *Prologue*, when news of the war appears within the monarchy as an effect of impure forces, although, paradoxically, a bath removes "all the impurity of [a soldier's] former civilian life" (*The Salt of the Earth*, p. 290).

The last act of the ritual is the metamorphosis that occurs as a result of the uniform. It completes the process of incorporating Piotr Niewiadomski into the world of war. From that moment on, the protagonist's return to his previous state of consciousness becomes impossible. The justification of events by referring to supernatural and demonic forces plays an important role in Wittlin's novel. We notice, then, that in this way the author challenges humanity's attempt at transferring the responsibility for reality, history, and the course of events to independent transcendent forces that have superhuman energy at their disposal. The narrator ironically suggests that the devil is responsible for the invention of print, the human "pride of being capable," war, and all evil. Humanity remains innocent and is subjected to the activity of powerful foreign forces. Naturally, Wittlin precludes such an interpretation, although unfortunately readers of *The Salt of the Earth* have not always avoided such a trap. In his *Postscriptum do "Soli ziemi" po trzydziestu pięciu latach* ("Postscript to *The Salt of the Earth* after Thirty-Five Years"), the writer emphasizes how irrational, in his view, the mechanism that caused soldiers to kill and

to be killed is.<sup>18</sup> The economic, social, and political causes of a conflict do not relieve anyone of his or her responsibility. At the same time, we see how Wittlin makes use of the initiation ritual, but simultaneously presents it in an ironic way. The protagonist's initiation does not lead to full identity, to cognition and mature humanity. We do not know where exactly Piotr is headed.

The characteristic finale of Niewiadomski's story is the fact that the protagonist stands on the square used for training and can no longer move his hand; it is no longer dependent on his will, but on the words of the military chaplain Bachmatiuk. The process of transition from humanity to reification, as the course of events concerning Niewiadomski has often been interpreted, is certainly an inverted initiation. Becoming initiated in the war, which is sacralized in the presented world, becomes a parody of initiation. As I have mentioned above, this is the result of the stylistic shape of the entire novel and a narration strategy that precludes ironic distance from the presented worldview of the protagonist. The *rite de passage* understood as a path towards cognition and self-awareness, with reference to the experiences of the protagonist of *The Salt of the Earth*, forces us to pose questions about what has really happened to Piotr Niewiadomski and what could happen next. The description of Hutsul country quoted by me at the beginning of this article mentions that the railway bursting into the quiet of night "arouses people's drowsy curiosity." It is curiosity that aroused the human effort to make discovery and progress possible, leading, on the one hand, to changes in civilization and, on the other, to increased knowledge about the world. Such curiosity is an impetus for asking questions. Niewiadomski's journey could be a path to recognizing one's own situation in the world. Before the outbreak of war, Piotr the simpleton had congealed in a reality ordered and imposed from outside, one in which there is no room for rebellion and doubt. The examination before the Imperial Recruiting Commission led to his resistance as a result of the confrontation between the norms that had hitherto been obligatory and the laws of the army. The involuntary journey forces Piotr to ask questions and causes his doubts to multiply. Gradually, the number of acts of independent thinking will grow. Niewiadomski begins to think about the criterion for the division of people into "his own" and "others," which in light of the ethnic diversity of the peoples living in the Austro-Hungarian Empire gives rise to numerous dilemmas related to faith and language. He asks questions about the right to kill others. What had hitherto been distinct to him (i.e., good and evil) is called into question due to the influence of new experiences. When contemplating the causes of the death of the pope, Piotr looks for rationales in the order of magical thinking:

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<sup>18</sup> J. Wittlin, "Postscriptum do *Soli ziemi* po trzydziestu pięciu latach" [in:] idem, *Sól ziemi*, Warszawa 1979, p. 249.

I suppose – Piotr surmised – it’s because the clergy permit killing. Not only do they permit it; they expressly demand it. It now seems that the killing of a Muscovite is not a sin at all, or it is just a half-sin, like the killing of a Jew. Although it isn’t the same. Jews are non-believers, whereas Orthodox Christians believe in Jesus Christ. (...) If the Orthodox congregations had been non-believers, [the Greek-Catholic metropolitan archbishop of Lviv] would not have come to visit them. This is all very confusing. You can no longer tell who is with us and who is the enemy, who is righteous and who is a sinner (*The Salt of the Earth*, pp. 163–164).

And so the questions and doubts continue to multiply in the simpleton’s head. It is interesting that the threads of these divagations are presented in Wittlin’s well-known essay titled: *Wojna, pokój i dusza poety* (“War, Peace, and the Poet’s Soul”). The writer raises strong objections to, for example, to the hypocrisy of inverted morality: “[R]eligion’s mouth is shut by inviting it to the administration of war” (*Orfeusz w piekle XX wieku*, p. 19). He does not hold contemporary civilization completely responsible for such a state of affairs, as the examples that he quotes date back to Biblical times and antiquity. Comparing the novel’s text with the essay makes us aware of the fact that Piotr is presented as someone who expresses the basic doubts of a person dealing with the absurdity of war. This is irrespective of his education and previous experiences, as these are questions that are basic enough that posing them does not depend on the number of books one has studied.

However, let us return to *The Salt of the Earth*. The observations and experiences in the garrison give rise to new doubts on the part of the narrator. This time, they are related to the authority of the emperor. Piotr notices that this good and merciful ruler demands of his “beloved peoples” absolute devotion and readiness to die. Previously, the protagonist had believed that serving the emperor was the greatest distinction and a basic duty. Meanwhile, Niewiadomski had imagined the relationship between the ruler and his subject as that between a father and his child. This image of the emperor will eventually change. Above all, Piotr recognizes the inconstancy of the emperor’s grace, noting pithily: “[Y]ou are a gendarme today and tomorrow you’re a thief...” (*The Salt of the Earth*, p. 251). He also poses questions about the meaning of imperial laws with regards to soldiers: “[W]hy has the Emperor visited so much fear, so much anger, so much punishment on his own people? Would it not be better to save all his anger for the Muscovites? After all, it’s them he is at war with, not us” (*The Salt of the Earth*, p. 251). Finally, the protagonist asks questions about the genuineness of the emperor’s care and concern. The emperor’s traditional address to his “beloved peoples,” which had hitherto been treated literally, shows Piotr the pure cold-bloodedness of the emperor’s insincerity. His doubts are sealed with the following statement: “They did not trust us. We were surrounded on all sides as in a prison camp” (*The Salt of the Earth*, p. 254). It is worth noting the characteristic

change in the grammatical form of the statement: Piotr, who identifies with the entire collective group, expresses its experience.

Therefore, the Piotr Niewiadomski we see on the square used for training is not the same Piotr Niewiadomski we saw as the porter at the Topory-Czernielica railway station. This is not only because he is wearing a uniform and his role has been relegated to that of a tool, a mere cog in the war machine. He is also a different person in another sense; namely, he has begun to ask the world questions and his doubts have started to multiply as he challenges the order he is supposed to become subordinate to. Without a doubt, this is an effect of his journey and of the trials he has been subjected to. However, he might not fully achieve the independent thinking and critical attitude towards the world he has begun, with difficulty, to gain. Niewiadomski's future remains unclear. There is no unambiguous answer to the question of if the initiated process of independent thought will result in the protagonist developing a conscious outlook on the world. It remains an open question if Piotr will be capable of trying to change his surrounding reality or if his objectification has finally occurred. We can infer, however, that Niewiadomski will succumb to the war machine, as the narrative distance to the protagonist, as evidenced in the ironic or even nearly caricatural presentation of Piotr's predicaments, demonstrates. Although the protagonist enjoys the author's favor, this does not mean uncritical acceptance, which researchers have sometimes suggested.<sup>19</sup> I believe that for the author, at least at the point at which the first volume of the intended trilogy ends, Niewiadomski is incapable of carrying the burden of knowledge about the world and about his conscious participation in the events that history imposes upon him. At the same time, the very fact that the initiation ritual is used legitimizes both this interpretation and its opposite. Wittlin both summons and challenges the meaning of the initiation ritual. It seems, however, that interpreting *The Salt of the Earth* solely as an anti-war protest and glorification of simplicity would impoverish the novel.<sup>20</sup>

The ritual that takes place during the journey to war serves to set off certain processes in the protagonist's consciousness. They should lead to analysis

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<sup>19</sup> Alois Woldan, the author of very perceptive comments on *The Salt of the Earth*, writes about the novel's protagonist in a way I find difficult to agree with: "(...) [T]hey [the horrors of war – D.S.] do not mean the end of the protagonist, who goes through this hell on earth relatively unscathed in order carry the 'salt' he personifies and give it to others. Here, individual stories do not symbolize a global end, but they contradict and nullify him; after the apocalypse, there is also a future for people who are 'pure of heart' (...)" (*Mit Austrii w literaturze polskiej*, Kraków 2002, p. 252). I would also dispute Krystyna Jakowska's statement that "Piotr's ignorance which, after all, is never criticized by the author, is in fact subject to vindication" (op. cit., p. 201).

<sup>20</sup> Wittlin himself protested against reading the novel only in the spirit of pacifism, as is evidenced in his letter to Juliusz Sakowski, quoted by Zygmunt Kubiak in his essay "Polski homeryda" ("The Polish Homericist" [in:] J. Wittlin, *Sól ziemi*, Warszawa 1979, pp. 291–292).

and self-analysis and, subsequently, the taking of responsibility for the reality in which one participates. The use of the initiation ritual allows the writer to ask one more question, that of who is responsible for chaos and evil. The description of place cited at the beginning of this article contains a juxtaposition of the bucolic landscape of nature and the evil forces of civilization. This opposition is maintained and emphasized throughout the novel. Civilization is marked by its key inventions; here, print and the railway give birth to war. However, as a result of the nearly caricaturally overstated and ironic distance, we cannot consider this juxtaposition to be obvious and certain.

In the context of the above comments, the novel's title also sounds ironic and could signify a challenge to the naive faith prevalent during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the strength of the archaic community that was supposed to represent ethnic purity and the bedrock of humanity. Thus for me the description of place that opens the book is bitterly perverse. Wittlin says that here is a world that we have mythologized, believing in the power of its innocence, yet at the same time such a vision is rather naive. The patience of the foot soldier that is referenced in the subtitle can, after all, be a flaw and a form of negligence. A similar meaning can be ascribed to the title. The Biblical context necessitates that we see in this description "the most valuable and indispensable virtues" and thus, figuratively, the most virtuous people. Hence the numerous interpretations of the title as a defense of simplicity and primeval innocence. However, a read of the novel directed by ironic distance and the parodistic nature of many scenes leads to doubts in this regard. It is uncertain if the "salt of the earth" in whose virtue we want so naively to believe can conserve the virtues that really are the most valuable. After all, simplicity and naivety lead one to succumb to herd instinct or to external coercion. Let us look at Piotr deprived of the idealized aura of a simpleton. Admittedly, he knows that he does not know,<sup>21</sup> but it seems that this is insufficient. Delighting in his innocence and naivety can lead to an easy absolution of us all. Perhaps we are instead dealing with a parody of initiation, a parody of sacralization, or a parody of ritual and myth. No one has yet categorically settled if a rebellion of the masses against the authorities of any war is possible. However, in light of totalitarianism, the question of what responsibility individuals who consent to their rulers' decisions bear has been posed on many occasions.

Wittlin himself leads me to such conclusions. In the previously mentioned text, *Wojna, pokój i dusza poety* ("War, Peace, and the Poet's Soul"), he writes about the behavior of almost the entirety of European society with respect to the beginning of the First World War; he compares the attitude of the masses to being possessed. What is important from my point of view

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<sup>21</sup> See: Z. Kubiak, "Polski homeryda," op. cit., p. 295.

is that, in the aforementioned essay, the author does not distinguish between “simpletons” and “civilized” people. Irony is essential in the quoted fragment:

Anyone who had the audacity to question the existence of faith and good will among people may have then experienced a disgraceful failure; in that time, millions of people, both ignorant and enlightened, believed as one in the infallible revelation of the newspapers. It seemed that all of humanity was overcome with a religious frenzy and ecstatic inebriation, awaiting the long-awaited Messiah. (...) Naturally, the reader of newspapers in those days felt as if individual peoples (...) have one will and one heart; consequently, he or she considered the dogmas proclaimed upon the welcoming of war to be his or her own and holy. He knelt before them, not suspecting any falsehood (OWP, p. 16).

Thus war is presented here as the effect of errors in the perception of reality (not only) by politicians, but also by a society that is prone to being manipulated. Józef Wittlin also presented this in the novel's *Prologue*, in the powerfully metaphorical description of war as a wave encompassing everything and everyone, regardless of age, status, nationality, or level of education.<sup>22</sup> Everyone bears responsibility, although not all do so to an equal degree. It is worth remembering that Wittlin's protagonist has slightly different traits than the simpleton in Rousseau's works. I believe that the author of *The Salt of the Earth* represents a characteristic ethical maximalism.<sup>23</sup> When Wittlin was wrapping up work on the book in 1935, the specter of yet another horrific war was hanging over Europe. Every person who was alive then bears responsibility for it. This is also, or perhaps above all, because we easily believe in a mythologized image, succumb to idols like Bachmatiuk, and allow ourselves to be deluded by various ideologies, be they of an ideological origin (such as Nazism) or of a philosophical one (such as the myth of the eternal return and the value of primeval innocence).<sup>24</sup> Twentieth century history gave blatant evidence of the effects of the tacit approval of rulers possessed by an ideal. It seems that Wittlin accurately predicted what the glorification of primeval innocence could lead to if it becomes repackaged as the justification for the lack of doubts and responsible co-participation. Then, myth and ritual become simplified and are treated superficially. Their basic dimension, which creates meaning, and their significance for the shaping of the identity

<sup>22</sup> We can find a similar notion in Elias Canetti, both in his autobiography *The Tongue Set Free* and in his study on the phenomena of the twentieth century titled: *Crowds and Power*.

<sup>23</sup> Zoya Yourieff quotes Jan Stur, who says that “Wittlin feels ‘ethical responsibility’ for the deepest essence of life, which is survival and the expression of survival” (op. cit., p. 48). These words refer to *Hymny* (“Hymns”), which to me touches upon the essence of the Wittlinian attitude towards the world.

<sup>24</sup> Naturally, I am not suggesting equivalence between these two things; rather, I mean a similar mechanism.

of a mature and conscious person are subject to eradication. However, there is no doubt that society (as such) is, in a certain sense, an abstract entity; after all, it is composed of individuals, their individual decisions and actions. Initiation is supposed to lead to maturity; however, the protagonist of *The Salt of the Earth* probably does not achieve this end. The incisive writer, who was capable of giving the impression that he “ridicules us and laughs at us,”<sup>25</sup> places before our eyes a mirror so that we can look into it, regardless of the times in which we live. Not only is the character of Niewiadomski a mirror of this,<sup>26</sup> but the entire context of the character’s fortunes is as well. In this sense, *The Salt of the Earth* is a timeless novel that without a doubt in the future will incline readers to many possible interpretations.

*Translated by Filip Mazurczak*

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<sup>25</sup> According to the author’s daughter Elżbieta Wittlin-Lipton. See the discussion reprinted in the program of the conference *Etapy Józefa Wittlina. W 115 rocznicę urodzin, 75 – wydania Soli ziemi i 35 – śmierci* (“Józef Wittlin’s Stages: On the 115<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of His Birth, Seventy-Fifth of the Publication of *The Salt of The Earth*, and the Thirty-Fifth of His Death”), Kraków, April 14–15, 2011; see also: W. Ligeża, “Gorycz wszelkiej słodyczy. Rozmowa z E. Wittlin-Lipton,” *Dekada Literacka* 1999, no. 11–12.

<sup>26</sup> See the description by Z. Yourieff mentioned at the beginning of this text.



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