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**JERZY STEMPOWSKI ON JÓZEF WITTLIN'S
*SALT OF THE EARTH***

In 1954 in New York the fifth Polish edition of Józef Wittlin's *Salt of the Earth* (*Sól ziemi*) was published. Wittlin sent one of the copies of this edition to Jerzy Stempowski, who immediately replied, "[t]hank you very much for *Salt of the Earth* with a beautiful dedication. I have started reading it and I really admire it. Of course, I read it when it was first published in Poland and also later in the French translation. [...] *Salt of the Earth* has victoriously withstood the hardest of trials, the trial of time, and I read it, every time, in a different way, but with equal delight."¹

In 1955 Jerzy Stempowski published in *Kultura* a short review of the first part of the trilogy of 'a patient infantryman'.

For Stempowski, this book had not lost 'the aura of novelty' since it had been published in 1936 because of the way in which Wittlin had constructed the world depicted in this novel. "The very artistic concept of *Salt of the Earth* seems to me to be the most striking aspect of the novel."²

Stempowski was convinced that *Salt of the Earth* was "one of the best Polish novels written between the wars" as well as a narrative which transcended cultural borders. Therefore, despite changing literary

¹ The letter of Jerzy Stempowski to Józef Wittlin dated 8 February 1855 in: J. Stempowski, *Listy do różnych adresatów...*, intro. Jan Kott, Wojciech Karpiński, afterword Andrzej Stanisław Kowalczyk, ed. by. Barbara Toruńczyk, Warszawa 2000, 174.

² Paweł Hostowiec, *Nowe wydanie «Soli ziemi»*, „Kultura” 1955, no. 7/8, 200.

tendencies and readers' attitudes, it remained to be perceived as universal. And it did not lose its uniqueness. Wittlin was and remained free as an artist. He looked at the experience of WWI from a certain distance, and in this way his novel approximated in its scope the works of ancient writers, who cared about the proportions between things and words. That may have been the reason, Stempowski mused, why the tale about Piotr Niewiadomski, an illiterate son of an unknown father and a Hutsul mother, a soldier of the Great War, was so popular with readers and experts of literature from different countries.

The text "O *Soli Ziemi Wittlina*" ("On Wittlin's *Salt of the Earth*") is the record of the first reading of Wittlin's novel by Stempowski, which he mentioned in the fragment of the letter quoted above. He read this novel in 1936 in the context of events which were at that time contemporary. In fact, he evaluated it against the background of the moral condition of Europe at that time, threatened by two totalitarianisms, Europe at the threshold of WWII. This text is not only the novel's praise. It does not concentrate exclusively on the structural mastery of it. Stempowski analysed Wittlin's novel in the context of the intellectual achievements of writers and thinkers, who over the centuries promoted humanitarian ideas and who opposed ideological scheming.

[JERZY STEMPOWSKI]

Of Wittlin's *Salt of the Earth*.

Interest in formal criticism has been strong in Warsaw over the last few years. I am certain that among my gracious audience there are quite a few people who could competently consider the construction of characters in the novel by Wittlin, the nature of his metaphors and the ways in which the flow of time is expressed. These are matters worthy of consideration, and if we take into consideration the interest which these issues cause in the younger generation, they will most probably be considered. However, before the next volumes of *Powieść*

*o Cierpliwym Piechurze (A Novel About a Patient Infantryman)*³ give us material to look at the construction of this huge fresco, I would like to begin with some general remarks. When we approach the first big novel of a writer, who is already well known for texts of various literary genres, we should at first look at the whole of this novel, at its general moral and artistic attitude, and try to place this book within the genre of the novel.

Salt of the Earth is a novel about war, which uses enormous and well selected material of observations. As if in a gigantic fresco, Wittlin reveals in front of us thousands of colourful details placed in an organic whole. Details of traditions, gestures, reflexes, customs, ways of living, businesses, rules and organizational bonds of which 'Old Austria' consisted of.

Not much has been lately said about 'Old Austria', a monarchy of two heads, which was a legendary Babel Tower of the modern era. Segregation of the languages which were mixed there took place just seventeen years ago, and yet the picture of this strange construct is already beginning to blur in our memories. Even old Austrian senior associates, who work in our Ministries, seem to remember only fragments and snippets of the not so distant past. The former apostolic⁴ monarchy was cut with a border knife, and countries which were part of it have grown in a new order. Thousands of connections formed by traditions, business, ways of living, likes, idiosyncrasies, pacts and legal regulations which had bound together different parts of Old Austria and its subjects were broken. Along border posts, border guards have trod parallel paths, between which border zones became overgrown with deep grass, walked over from time to time

³ This is the title of Józefa Wittlin's trilogy, the first part of which was *Salt of the Earth*. The subsequent parts of the trilogy were never written, they were to be entitled *Zdrowa śmierć (Healthy Death)* and *Dziura w niebie (A Hole in the Sky)*. All the footnotes come from the editor. M. Ch.

⁴ The Emperor of Austria also had the title Apostolic King of Hungary.

by the feet of smugglers. Old, ancient ways, which were used to go to fairs and name day parties are now closed with barbed wire and they have already become overgrown. Today, no one seems to consider it possible that these bonds, lasting for centuries, which put together the subjects of apostolic Kaisers, could return to life in any form. The nations of Europe have locked themselves within their borders. They put iron curtains in their windows and mutual threats have become a form of greeting. Today, nobody seems to remember the eternal aspect of Old Austria, about the idea—represented by it, after the Tower of Babel, the empire of Alexander the Great and the Roman Empire—of nations living on their own lands and preserving their traditions and revulsions, but nevertheless united by a common political organization. Whoever decided to pick up again the idea of a United States of Europe⁵ would have to read the old constitution of Old Austria and a textbook of Austrian state law written by Ludwik Gumplewicz⁶ in order to see the formulas which the ancient Chimera adopted.

⁵ After the Great War the idea of the United States of Europe was born in the circles of the European intellectual elite. Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi was one of the supporters of this idea. In his periodical entitled *PanEuropa* he suggested the establishment of one European state. His idea inspired, among others, Aristide Briand (1862–1932), a French politician who was in the years 1909–1929 several times both a Prime Minister and a minister. Briand in 1930, during the session of the League of Nations introduced the proposal of the ‘Federational’ Union. It was to consist of three founding states: France, Great Britain and Germany, as well as other European states apart from Russia and Turkey. Édouard Herriot (1872–1957) was a French politician and three times Prime Minister of France (1924–1925, 1932). He wrote a book entitled *The United States of Europe* (1930), which became an important voice in the debate on the need to create a European federation. This debate was renewed only after the end of WWII. Winston Churchill in the speech given at the university of Zurich on 19 September 1946 returned to the concept of establishing of the United States of Europe, with the USA as a model.

⁶ Ludwik Gumplowicz (1838–1909) was a sociologist and theoretician of law. From 1882 he was a professor at Graz University. In 1892 he became a full professor of state law. He came up with daring sociological hypotheses, and he is considered a representative of the theory of conflict. He was convinced that sociology should study history as a natural process.

Recalling from oblivion issues and pictures of great dimensions which have been connected with the eternal instincts of humankind has always been a prerequisite of artists. Old Austria, which Wittlin shows in *Salt of the Earth*, is no longer a young Chimera tempting Sphinx, but a Chimera which is sclerotic, agonizing, pushed onto the path of war deeds so alien to her, being on the brink of sending her nations into an abyss of hardship and misery, doomed to catastrophe. Nevertheless, her specific and paradoxical beauty is still present on the pages of Wittlin's book, similar to the one described by him as "one of these Austrian faces which so happily combine the characteristics of the Neo-Latin, the German and the Slav races."⁷

This huge mass of observations, ready—as was then the case in the Austrian reality—to obliterate any ordering thoughts, is thanks to Wittlin's literary skills, ordered into some whole, and unobtrusively presents a certain hierarchy of values. The process of converting this huge mass of observations into a work of art, undertaken by Wittlin on such a grand scale in *Salt of the Earth*, seems to me to be the most fascinating and topical aspect of this novel.

The world of an artist is distinctly different from the world we know from experiences and observations. The latter is neither good nor bad; it does not have its own order when it comes to values, while an artist's world is filled with emotions and ordered according to values. Art, Raphael used to say, is glorification of nature—*una glorificazione della natura*. Raphael went on to add that the capability to frame the experienced world into a certain order of values, into some abstracts, simplifications, making some good choices in it, of glorying it, have been with mankind from the beginning. Our remote ancestors in their caves had skills, created a fictitious world of art around themselves, which surrounded them in an atmosphere filled with emotions. Man creates for himself conditions which allow him to live in the murky climate of the north. In the same way an artist

⁷ Jozef Wittlin, *Salt of the Earth*, transl. by Pauline de Chary, Stackpole Books, Harrisburg, 1970, 288.

creates around him a certain moral aura, defending our emotional life from brutal contact with an inhospitable moral climate.

This role of a work of art is particularly powerful when we deal with a novel which describes war. War creates a particularly inhospitable moral climate of horrible pressure, which breaks the delicate bonds of our emotional life. In order to survive its destructive march the people who fight are forced to adopt a certain hierarchy of values, of the morality of a city under siege, in which there are no individual problems and individual judgements, and everything is subjected to the provisional necessities of war, represented, for example, by the infantrymen regimen, interpreted by *stabsfeldfebel* Bachmatiuk.⁸

Under the moral pressure of the Great War almost the whole intellectual elite of Europe broke. Circles which were most suited to defend the heritage of Erasmus, the author of *Antipolemus*,⁹ the heritage of Voltaire and Kant, the author of *Zum ewigen Frieden*,¹⁰ out of which a century later the pact of the League of Nations¹¹ was born, failed. Everybody remembers the manifesto of ninety-three

⁸ Rudolf Bachmatiuk, is one of the protagonists of Wittlin's *Salt of the Earth*. He is a Ukrainian, a son of a village mayor, a sergeant, who looks after recruits in the army, he is an enthusiast of military service, fanatical in his job, believing in rules and discipline.

⁹ "Antipolemus," was an anti-war essay written by Erasmus in Latin and published in 1517.

¹⁰ "Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch" was an essay by Kant which was published in 1795. Kant took the term 'perpetual peace' de l'*abbé* Saint-Pierre "Traite de la paix perpetuelle", (1713). In this essay Kant dealt with the themes of making wars illegal, and a common yearning for universal and perpetual peace. This essay is a summary of the intellectual endeavours of distinguished thinkers, who over the centuries were considering actions which could lead to the peaceful coexistence of states and nations.

¹¹ The pact of the League of Nations came into effect on 20 January 1920. It was a part of the Treaty of Versailles, which was signed on 28 June 1819, which formally ended WWI.

German scientists and writers¹², as well as Lissauer's "Hassgesang gegen England"¹³

Wir lieben vereint, wir hassen vereint,
Wir haben alle nur einen Feind – England.¹⁴

At the same time, on the other side of the front, Henri Bergson¹⁵ wrote pamphlets to boost the warlike morale, which were published by the office of the French Army. Joseph Bédier¹⁶ used letters and notes found with the bodies of killed German soldiers to try to prove that Germans were barbarians. Paul Géraudy¹⁷ introduced war to ladies in

¹² The Manifesto of Ninety-Three German Intellectuals was the name given to the declaration of support for the German war effort in 1914 on the territory of neutral Belgium. The German activities were commonly referred to as "the rape of Belgium". The document was signed by a numerous group of German scientists, artists, psychiatrists and chemists. In 1921 it was published in *The New York Times* with the list of those who had signed it.

¹³ "Hassgesang gegen England" ["The Hymn of Hatred Towards England"] was written in 1914 by Ernest Lissauer (1882–1937), a German poet of Jewish origins. It was highly esteemed. Lissauer received for it a medal of the Red eagle. It was published in all newspapers, and German soldiers knew it by heart. Music was written for it, and in this form it was performed in theatres. After the end of WWI Germans attempted to improve their relations with England, and as a result Lissauer's texts were banned.

¹⁴ "We love together, we hate together. We have only one enemy—England"

¹⁵ Henri Bergson (1859–1941), French philosopher and writer, came up with the concept of *élan vital*; in 1927 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. He wrote, among others, *The Nature of German Imperialism*.

¹⁶ Joseph Bédier (1864–1938), French literary critic and writer, a distinguished specialist of the Middle Ages. He wrote, among others, *A New History of French Literature* (1923–1924). Jerzy Stempowski is referring to his *Les crimes allemands d'après les témoignages allemands*, (1915). Bédier ordered fragments of journals, notes and letters of German soldiers he had found himself, and showed thirty-six cases of sexual and sadistic crimes perpetrated on French soldiers and Belgian civilians.

¹⁷ Paul Géraudy, pseudo. Paul Lefèvre (1885–1983), French poet, writer and playwright.

a booklet entitled *La Guerre, Madame...*¹⁸ Anatol France¹⁹ himself, in an open letter to the Minister of War, general Messimy,²⁰ asked to be enlisted despite his old age. The learned naturalists and technicians from both camps, chairmen of academies of sciences and leaders of grand scientific foundations were working on manufacturing war gases.

The behaviour of Europe's intellectual elite had a terrible impression on soldiers in the trenches. My university colleagues who were fighting on the French front came back on leave more and more terrified and discouraged. We thought, they were saying, that behind us there was a great civilization which we were to defend in the trenches. The behaviour of our elite proves that it was an illusion, that there is no civilization behind us and that our sacrifices are useless.

In this gloomy picture the voice of an old doctor and a friend of man, Sigmund Freud, was lonely, ominous and horrible, as if it was the measure of Europe's moral fall. In an essay entitled "Zeitgemässes über den Tod und Krieg",²¹ written during the war and confiscated by all censors, Freud came up with the argument that the moral level of warring Europeans was below the level of primeval tribes, where

¹⁸ (1919) Jerzy Stempowski, in an essay "Żołnierz niemiecki jako moralista", ("A German Soldier as a Moralist") (1930) wrote about this novel in the following way: "Géraldy, author of a well known volume of poetry, wrote during the war, an elegant, cunning and stupid little novel *La guerre, madame...*, which was intended to boost the morale of ladies distraught by war. The main argument he put forward was that ladies who stayed at home should not despair because their husbands and sons were doing very well in trenches, and should accept with equanimity their new conditions of life." See J. Stempowski, *Szkice literackie*, vol. 1: *Chimera jako zwierzę pociągowe 1926–1941*, ed. by Jerzy Timoszewicz, Warszawa 2001, 32.

¹⁹ Anatol France, François-Anatole Thibault (1844–1924), a French novelist and literary critic, member of Academie Francaise from 1896, Nobel Prize winner in 1921, he co-operated with communist periodicals *L'Humanité* and *Clarté*.

²⁰ Adolphe Messimy (1869–1939), French officer and politician, a Minister of War in the government of René Viviani from 13 June to 26 August 1914.

²¹ This essay was published in 1915. Freud refers to the death drive as a component of human nature, which leads to the destruction of all products of culture.

usually the victorious warriors, if forced to kill, were bound to atone for this. But in Europe there was no atonement. Its intellectual elite, led by most the famous philosophers, adopted the unified morality of a besieged camp—*wir lieben vereint, wir hassen vereint*, was quick to absolve all who were fighting. One ardent pastor, in an exquisite sermon "Jesus aus MG", even tried to prove that Jesus, if he lived today, would be a soldier in a German platoon of Machine Guns,

This behaviour of the European elite had new elements which had not existed in earlier centuries. To realize in what sense this was a new situation it is enough to remember the Napoleonic period, which was in many ways similar. The literature of the Empire, with its best representatives who have entered the canon of literature, managed to repel the horrible demagoguery of Napoleon, did not give in to the pressure Napoleon created, and preserved its moral independence. It is very rare that people of intelligence and talent are also people of great integrity. Chateaubriand,²² Paul-Louis Courier,²³ Benjamin Constans²⁴ or Madame de Staël²⁵ were not similar to indomitable Cato. They all had moments of weaknesses and just tried to survive. But they were all diligent in fighting against the mobilization of literature for the sake of Napoleon. This fight was not easy. Napoleon was totally ruthless, he had no qualms of conscience, he had an iron will and treated the idea of turning literature for his purposes as absolutely crucial. In his recent book

²² François-René de Chateaubriand (1768–1848), one of the writers of French pre-Romanticism, wrote, among others, *Essai sur les révolutions* (1797).

²³ Paul-Louis Courier (1773–1825), French writer, Hellenist, he wrote on social and political issues. His works were published in *Le Censeur Européen* (1818).

²⁴ Henri-Benjamin Constant de Rebecque (1767–1830), French writer, philosopher, political activist. In the period of Restoration he was the leader of the liberal party. He wrote political essays and a novel, *Adolf* (1816).

²⁵ Madame de Staël (1776–1817), Anne Louise Necker de Staël-Holstein; French writer and essayist, came from Switzerland. Theoretician of pre-Romanticism and Romanticism. She wrote *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales* (1800).

John Charpentier²⁶ told a fascinating and illuminating story of this fight, which ended with Napoleon's defeat. The intellectuals and artists of Europe at that time turned out to be refractory to all attempts of mobilization.

The collapse of the European intelligentsia during the war created huge chips and dents in the moral picture of Europe, and the repair of them would take more time and effort than the repair of provinces destroyed during the war.²⁷ According to Plato's testimony, Socrates thought that virtue is connected with knowledge about morality, that it is knowledge of moral issues. This idea of Socrates has found its ways, in this or that form, into almost all books about ethics. From the times of ancient Greeks all the schoolbooks included the idea that certain specific knowledge is identical with morality, and that knowledge and intelligence in general are indispensable for moral progress. Two and a half thousand years ago Socrates was at the beginning of a long line of philosophers. So, the specific knowledge about morality has been deepened by a few dozen generations of scholars and thinkers. But the place of learned moralists in our social hierarchy and the practical importance of their lessons is today probably smaller than in Athens. Philosophers of today are not forced to drink hemlock, in fact they get nothing stronger than castor oil. Such mild behaviour is the result of the fact that the scholars of our times, unlike Socrates, do not enter into conflicts with established systems of practical morality, that they all are, using the terminology of our times, *gleichgeschaltet*.²⁸

²⁶ John Charpentier (1880–1949) an intellectual, historian, librarian, biographer of writers and philosophers. He wrote mostly in French. Stempowski is referring to his book *Napoléon et les hommes de lettres de son temps* (1935).

²⁷ In the typescript of *Salt of the Earth* in this place there is a fragment crossed out by Stempowski: "Two and half thousand years ago Socrates said that morality is a kind of knowledge. From this time all school books on ethics say that morality is knowledge on moral issues and that expansion of knowledge and intelligence are indispensable for moral progress. Since the times of Socrates hundreds of books on ethics have been written. A few dozen generations of philosophers and thinkers have deepened specialized knowledge, [...]"

²⁸ brought into line.

An even stranger reflection is created by the ratio of general knowledge and intelligence to morality. Thanks to the present system of schooling, probably more young people go to schools and are forced to learn in a sustained manner than ever before. Millions of people who live today spend more than ten years in school, acquiring knowledge from books and from laboratories. Physiologists suppose that the very structure of the bodies of contemporary people has undergone deep changes as a result of more school subjects and more years spent in school. At the same time an amount of the excess and violence which go against our sense of morality is not committed by uneducated city riff-raff or peasants who plough fields, but by people connected with universities. In many countries the populace has started to reject the printed word as a carrier of moral degradation.

School education today seems to open the minds of people to moral sophistry and corruption. If we wanted to derive educated man's contemporary moral standard from classical forms, we should recognize in this type an heir of Socrates's main antagonists in Plato's dialogues, that is of Calicles, who was arguing that laws and morality established two thousand years ago are still valid, and that our times have brought a great defeat of Socrates, who this time is defeated not by poison but by the desertion of alleged disciples.

This moral state of Europe today has more than one cause. But its crystallization happened under the influence of the war. This grimace on the moral face of Europe, wanted by no one, still exists, and that is why each year brings new novels about the war. All people suffering in the moral climate of contemporary Europe return to the sources of this corruption, to the *peccatum originale*²⁹ of the intelligentsia of today, to the fatal crossroads when the mental life of the world lost its independence.

Eleven years ago Wittlin's first book was published, *Wojna, pokój i dusza poety* (*War and Peace and a Poet's Soul*).³⁰ Its cover includes

²⁹ Original Sin.

³⁰ The first edition: Józef Wittlin, *Wojna, Pokój i dusza poety. Szkice literackie i przemówienia*, Zamość 1925.

an announcement about *Powieść o cierpliwym piechurze* (*A Novel about a Patient Infantryman*). So, for eleven years Wittlin has been struggling with the vision of war in himself, trying to weaken the horrible moral grip. In his first essay Wittlin is full of unspeakable bitterness and turbulence. His essay was written before Remarque's novel,³¹ when the war was still a fresh memory. We see in this essay a Wittlin who is still agitated and protesting, full of sorrow and complaints, still not free from coercion. Nonconformists, like Wittlin or Remarque, take these things much more painfully than conformists, who pay off their alleged debt to their country through a few songs of hatred, who easily move on to the next period. In *Salt of the Earth* we see a Wittlin who is already internally free, looking at the war from some distance, who has freedom of judgement and choice when it comes to his subject. When we compare different novels about the Great War, we will see that the last one, *Salt of the Earth*, has more freedom and more lack of internal coercion than all the earlier ones. This is the first reason why this novel is to us a good tidings, which presents the possibility of getting free from the moral weight of the war which is still on us all, the possibility of an exit from this inhospitable moral climate.

In his book about the contemporary novel Albert Thibaudet³² notes that almost all novels about the war belong to the category of "the novel of destiny"—*roman de la destinée*, in which we see the protagonists' lives developing independently from their will.

³¹ Erich Maria Remarque, Erich Mark Remerk (1898–1970), German writer. He took part in WWI. He used his experiences in the novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*. (1929). Jerzy Stempowski wrote an essay about this novel: "Żołnierz niemiecki jako moralista" ("A German Soldier as a Moralist"), (1930). See J. Stempowski, *Szkice literackie*, vol.1, op. cit., 29–40.

³² Albert Thibaudet (1874–1936) French literary critic and essayist, disciple of Bergson, was given the chair of French literature in Geneva. In 1911–1936 he edited *Nouvelle Revue Française*. He sided with right wing writers. Jerzy Stempowski refers to: *Histoire de la littérature française de 1789 à nos jours* (1936). Stempowski wrote an essay "Fizjologia krytyki" ("Physiology of Criticism") about his novel *Physiologie de la critique* (1930). It was first published in *Wiadomości Literackie* 1931, no. 8.

Thibaudet has no doubts that Barbusse's³³ *Le Feu* should also be treated as such.

He is convinced that our tragic period should awaken in us the sense of destiny which ancient Greeks once had. However, Thibaudet also sees some contradiction between the sense of destiny and the advantages of a soldier-warrior. "The highest value at war belongs to the following: a sense of adventure, will, ingenuity, focus on the present moment. These are all features which the West focused in its first hero, in divine Ulysses. However, we cannot imagine any Ulysses of the East."

Salt of the Earth perfectly suits Thibaudet's classification. Like in eastern novels, Piotr Niewiadomski follows his fate like a drop of water carried by a stream. This submission to fate seems to have a deeper meaning in Wittlin's novel. Wittlin knows many different shades of this passivity, he returns to it so many times, knows so many of its secrets, that we would like to consider it for a while.

Eastern fatalism seems to be a kind of natural border of all types of coercion. The East was shaped under the influence of ruling despots, who knew no boundaries to their whims. A dream of a tyrant is the same as the prayer—says an Eastern proverb.³⁴ Wittlin transfers moral attitudes onto the territory of the contemporary war. The moral imperative³⁴ carried by the war results in passivity, which is not useful for wars, it takes away the will of victory, which turns wars into the absurd. *Salt of the Earth* as a novel of destiny seems to draw to the war a new border of power.

Finally, I would like to say a few words about a social role of novels of the type of *Salt of the Earth*, the novel which reduces the pressure of great moral imperatives.

³³ Henri Barbusse (1873–1935), French writer, journalist. In 1916 his novel *La Feu* (*Under Fire*) was published. It was based on his experiences of the war and is strongly anti-military. The novel was awarded La Prix Goncourt in 1916

³⁴ In the typescript the word "muzułmański" ("Muslim") was crossed out in this fragment.

Jacques Bainville,³⁵ who died a few years ago, in his book about Napoleon, states that Napoleon was scared very much of the people referred to as *les joueurs a la baisse*, ‘gamblers on the fall’, people who were not susceptible to his demagogy and who at times of the greatest victories were reserved and preserved their independence of judgement. Napoleon himself was the first military commander who used a general draft to get soldiers, and who through the mobilization of all the nation’s powers and resources created huge moral pressure, which he personally supervised. But during his reign there appeared in France young elegant men wearing shaggy top hats, with gnarled sticks and impertinent binoculars, who were not moved by the charm of the great Emperor and his demagogy. They answered all his rambling clichés such as: “forty centuries behold you” or “if you say—I was in the battle of Austerlitz—everybody will answer you—a *voilà un brave*”³⁶—they answered coldly *c est incroyable*.³⁷ The ‘incroyables’ and their female friends, who were called *les merveilleuses*, ended the charm of a great ruler. One cold word defused colossal tensions. Without the charm of grandeur the Empire was turned into farce and nothingness. This is the source of Napoleon’s faith in the power of words, the magical power which could destroy the greatest powers in an unknown way. Napoleon opposed this magical power of words with the power of his censorship. Censorship has been since the measure which could be used to estimate the re-birth of faith in the magical power of words. Societies living without censorship do not believe in such a power. But everywhere, where the eternal and chimerical idea of changing people through coercion resurfaces again, the anxiety of dangerous words arises, words which could abolish the mightiest of powers.

³⁵ Jacques Bainville (1879–1936), French historian and journalist. Apart from Charles Maurras and Léon Daudet, the main figure of Action Française. Member of Academie Francaise 1935. Stempowski refers to the book *Napoléon* (1931).

³⁶ Here’s a brave one.

³⁷ This is incredible.

Editorial note

Jerzy Stempowski's talk about Wittlin's *Salt of the Earth* has never been published. The exact date of writing remains unknown. It can only be assumed that it was written a few days after Jacques Bainville's death. Stempowski documented this fact in a lecture devoted to Wittlin's novel. "Jacques Bainville, who died a few days ago, in his book about Napoleon states that Napoleon was scared very much of the people referred to as, *les joueurs a la baisse*, 'gamblers on the fall', people who were not susceptible to his demagoguery and who at times of the greatest victories were reserved and preserved their independence of judgements." Bainville died on 9 February 1936. On the same day, on the first page of *Wiadomości Literackie* (*Literary News*) (no. 6), the verdict of the jury of this periodical was announced, with the award and prize for the best book of the year: "Józef Wittlin was given both the award of readers of *Wiadomości Literackie* and the prize of the jury."

It is difficult to learn about the place and date of this talk. In the 1930s Stempowski gave talks in cities and towns like Warsaw, Cracow, Białystok, Lwów, Krzemieniec, and on Polish Radio. Maybe he delivered it to students of Państwowy Instytut Sztuki Teatralnej (State Institute of Theatrical Art), where in 1935 he gave lectures on the history of artistic conventions.

The text of the talk "On Wittlin's *Salt of the Earth*", to which my attention was drawn by Jerzy Timoszewisz, was edited on the basis of a typescript, in Dział Rękopisów Biblioteki Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego (Manuscript Section of Warsaw University) 1503(44). It has 13 pages. There are a few corrections made by its author: deletions, additions, remarks in margins. They are mostly of an editorial nature. The major changes in the text have been marked in the footnotes, like the fragment devoted to Socrates or the phrase "muzułmańskie przysłowie" ("Muslim proverb"). Attempts have been made to preserve the unique features of Stempowski's style.

M.Ch.