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## REMARKS ABOUT CENTRAL EUROPE IN POLISH CONTEMPORARY PROSE

### **Abstract**

The topic of Central Europe is one of the key problems for contemporary Polish literature, as it defines the issues of social identity as well as both individual and collective self-identification. As a “middle country” chocked in between two major spheres of influence: Russia and Germany; the East and the West, Poland has been voided of its statehood ever since the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and has been the place where these two spheres of influence kept clashing. The perception of Poland as the boundary between the influences, a historical bulwark of the West, the interwar bastion of western culture or a country from behind the Iron Curtain did not strengthen the bonds between its culture and Central Europe. The Iron Curtain bolstered the polarization of Central Europe after World War II and Polish literature observes this crack on two facets – chronological and spatial.

**Key words:** Central Europe, Polish contemporary prose, identity, border, west and east

## **Introduction**

In 1775 a Polish astronomer Szymon Antoni Sobiekrajski determined the geometric centre of Europe – it was to be located in the town of Suchowola in the Polish region of Podlasie. For over 200 years the little town had prided itself on being the centre of Europe until methods of taking measurements were refined and other points located in Germany, Ukraine, Lithuania and the Czech Republic started aspiring to this appellation... Maybe if such a point was determined for certain, it would be easier to define the notion of Central Europe? As Bogusław Zieliński wrote, the attempts to describe and define this region seem impossible, bringing about the sense of impotence among researchers who “desire to apply universal measures of description to describe various aspects of Central Europe, including: geography, history, sociology, politics, culture and aesthetics”. M. Foucher speaks about “untraceable Central Europe”, Europe that is “imaginary” and “dreamlike” (Konrad), Central Europe being the symbol of “fate”, “whose boundaries are notional” (Kundera), “indefinable, intangible, fleeting, whose contours change depending on the purpose” (Foucher) or even its “spectral, nebulous” nature (Szucs); a notion that is “empty” and “disputable” (Foucher). 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century geographers indeed accentuated the complexity and ontological contradiction of Central Europe. Himley and Kretschmacher speak about “indefinite individuality” and a “transitory” area; Kjellen even applies the attribute of “a critical area”; de Martonne emphasizes “the contrast” and cultural, historical and political “contradictions”, whereas Penck stresses “problems with determining the borders” (Zieliński, 2000).

## **Discussion**

Poland, as the rock in Suchowola symbolizing the centre of the Old Continent demonstrates, belongs to this part of Europe geographically, sociologically, culturally, politically (as one of the members of the Visegrad Group) and economically. For a very long time, though, this doubtless “centredness” of location was not the source of national and cultural identification. We lived in a “middle country” chocked in between two major spheres of influence: Russia and Germany; the East and the West. Ever since the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Poland, a country devoid of its statehood, had become the place where these two spheres of influence kept clashing. As a consequence, for many years the Central European location denoted the curse of having to choose between one of the two enemies and, simultaneously, identifying with one of the two cultural formations: the West or the East.

As Andrzej Stasiuk (2000: 136) writes in his essay *The Captain's log*, "this is what it means to be Central Europe: to live in between the East which never existed, and the West, which existed too pervasively. This is what it means to live "in the centre", when this centre is, in fact, the only real land. The only thing is that this land is not *terra firma*. It resembles more an island, a floating one. Or maybe even a ship subject to currents and winds from both the East and the West. The directions of the world, just like elements, are something in between of a symbol, an allegory and a fatal concretum. To live on this island or ship means as much as incessant peering for the change of weather, roaming the length and breadth of the island or the deck of the ship. And just like during a sea voyage, one can only think about the present and the future, as the past brings nothing but rational warnings such as 'you should have stayed home'. But home is on the voyage with us".

In 1994 Tomek Tryzna's debut novel entitled *Panna Nikt (Miss Nobody)* was published. The story of a 15-year-old Marysia Kawczakówna, who alongside her family moves from a village to the city of Wałbrzych only to get lost in the big city but also to lose her self, her personality and become a mere pawn in the game played by her cunning and ruthless female friends, was construed by the critics in various ways. The most obvious, initiatory, psychological interpretation, whereby Tryzna's novel was perceived as if it treated about the destruction of a young, extremely lonely girl, who could find support neither among her peers nor the adults, earned the book the surprising appellation of a novel for youngsters. One of the first reviews of *Miss Nobody* penned by Czesław Miłosz included a parabolic interpretation of the novel. Miłosz made a comparison between teenage Marysia, tempted by two females – the capricious artist and intellectualist Kasia, and the cold, cynical sybarite and materialist Ewa (naturally in the XXS size) – and the situation of Poland lured by the sophisticated, evil-ridden civilization of the East as well as the absolute corruption of the West. Tangled in this fight, Marysia loses her name and identity, depriving herself of the right to live. Kasia and Ewa in turn revisit their old alliance, having claimed another common victim... The analogy is painfully clear: Miss Nobody is someone nondescript, soaking the features of the surrounding like a sponge, totally submissive to those who decide about her fate unbeknown to her. She is someone who discarded her own non-attractive identity of her own volition. If this figure was to be transposed – as Miłosz did – to political categories, Poland would become Miss Nobody, the one deprived of its traditions, roots, cultural environment, left to the temptations of two enemies competing with each other.

The perception of Poland as the boundary between the influences, a historical bulwark of the West, the interwar bastion of western culture or a country from behind the Iron Curtain did not strengthen the bonds between our culture and Central Europe. The Iron Curtain, which was extremely effective in dividing the Old Continent, bolstered the polarization of Central Europe after World War II: the West constituted the prohibited yet coveted land of prosperity; the East remained the zone of the despised poverty and enslavement imposed by the political situation. Polish literature observes this crack on two facets – chronological and spatial, mainly due to the existence of the myth of the (Eastern) Borderlands, the prose of private homelands, which convey the lost values of the past and attempt to save old national traditions. It is in this trend that the writings of Konwicki, Kuśniewicz and Strykowski conjure up, even before 1989, the image of Poland as a part of Central Europe – multicultural continental community-civilization of the Slavs, the Germans, the Jews and the Finno-Ugric peoples.

The prose of the (Eastern) Borderlands has introduced into the Polish literature a characteristic figure of a 'hybrid', a man raised on the junction of different cultural and religious traditions (Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, Orthodox Church). This figure is open to otherness, tolerant, yet attached to the place of their birth, deeply rooted in their tradition and family values. The myth of the Eastern Borderlands creates a space of harmonious co-existence of nations different from each other in terms of their history, customs and religion, yet joined together by the ties stemming from their place of origin. This specific community assumes various forms – that of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy in Kuśniewicz's writings or Lithuania in the case of Konwicki's output. It always is, however, more strongly tied to its local community than the state; it constitutes a periphery rather than the centre. It is how the contemporary Polish literature becomes enriched in images of the Central European community, not bearing such a name back then yet, but already clearly delineated. One has to remember, though, that the image employs Arcadian motifs and its interpretation is most often linked to nostalgia, the longing for the lost space. The longing encompasses also the image of Central Europe which is a supranational community living in the land of happiness and tolerance (as illustrated by Filip Karpow in his book *The experience of space in Andrzej Kuśniewicz's prose*).

The outbreak of war has left its imprint on the fate of this mythical land (as well as on its image). Apart from losing the Eastern Borderlands – the homeland of many Poles – the war resulted in tearing Europe apart into two

antagonistic parts, spheres of influence epitomized by the Iron Curtain. The book *Ocalenie Atlantydy (The Rescue of Atlantis)* by Zyta Orszyn, published in 2012, comprises two compelling motifs connected to the image of Central Europe. One is a reinterpreted image of the Borderlands' community, precisely speaking the displaced people from the East living in former Waldburg, now called Leśny Brzeg, a town in Lower Silesia where Polish, German and Silesian cultures and nations mix and mingle. Such an image of multicultural Europe is extremely rare in Polish literature, being thoroughly suppressed by the post-war social and cultural state of affairs. Contemporarily, the image of multicultural Poland has begun to pave its way to the social awareness, mainly through the literary form of a report. The other aforementioned motif in Orszyn's piece is a symbolic representation of the Iron Curtain as a physical object dividing the world into two parts:

“The universe was separated into two uneven parts by the Iron Curtain. The capital city of Olek Walewski's universe was Moscow. Which city was the capital of the other universe remained undetermined. Americans claimed it to be Washington, but they walked upside down. The French opted for Paris, but they would eat frogs and snails on a daily basis. The English were adamant that London was the capital which was laughable. Olek Walewski could cover their little isles with a small inkwell. The world was obscured by beech trees, hornbeams, spruces and fir trees. Olek Walewski once climbed the tallest beech tree. The weather was crystal clear, as grandma stated. The coking plants were not emitting any smoke due to some sort of a malfunction. Olek thought that by such a lucky coincidence he would be able to see not only Gedymin's hill or Sobótka, but also the mountain of Śnieżka, which lies on the border. And once he sees Śnieżka, he will also see the Iron Curtain, as this kind of construction must go as high as the sky. It wasn't actually entirely clear whether the Iron Curtain reaches the sky or just some lowest clouds. Mietek Szczęsny claimed the latter was true. Because if it reached the sky, it would have to include some sort of locks, so as to enable planes to fly through. It was also undetermined how far the curtain reached towards the ground. Does it only touch the ground? Does it go under the ground? If it does, one has to have a camp shovel to be able to dig a tunnel underneath it. Olek Walewski's grandma claimed the curtain cannot be too tall and that it can be climbed like an iceberg, thus she recommended equipping oneself with a rope and pitons” (Orszyn, 2012: 55-56).

The childlike imagination transforms a political border into a spatial element, a piece of landscape, feasible to be conquered. It is not the awareness or identity or

ideology that constitutes an obstacle to unite the universe, but a huge iron barrier towering in the middle of Central Europe that thwarts its identity and unity by reestablishing the antagonistic order, a tear into two spheres of influence. After 1989 when it was possible to discuss the division openly, Polish writers raise the problem of European identity again – not so much in connection to Poland's accession to the EU; but contrarily, by attempting to sketch a new map of Europe which would feasibly capture Polish Europeanness (however paradoxical it may sound), as a fact of belonging to some cultural and communal space, to the community of countries sharing common history, political upheavals, and – what is linked to it – the sense of some sort of affinity. This marks the starting point of an attempt to determine the place not by means of antagonizing terms, but by searching for elements that allow identifying oneself with the supranational community.

At least two perspectives present in the new humanities are conducive to such a reflection: postcolonialism – today more often referred to as a post-belonging reflection – and geopoetics. The first of the two emphasizes political and social aspects of Central European countries, focusing on the cultural consequences of the changes of years 1944-1945 and 1989 – the dates denoting the beginning and the end of the post-war order, which – as I have mentioned earlier – tore Central Europe apart into the western and eastern parts, the latter coming under the influence of the Soviet Union (with Eastern and Western Germany being the case in point of the division). The other perspective, geopoetics, allows perceiving the spatial community in terms of cultural affinity, through experiencing space in a specific manner. In the literary reflection on Central Europe these two perspectives overlap, reinstating the place of Polish culture in its proper place within Europe. Importantly, it is not an exceptional, messianic place, the place of the chosen one... It is a place shared with other nations.

The aforementioned process of sketching the new map of the continent is a shared endeavor of writers, reporters, translators, editors, columnists. One may however, in my opinion, trace back the starting point of this trend – it is the publication of Andrzej Stasiuk's and Jurij Andruchowicz's essay *My Europe* (2000). The very fact of a joint authorship is very telling – a Ukrainian and a Pole write about their Europe and it is the same Europe, their shared source of experience. Central Europe. Stasiuk's (2000: 77) essay includes the figure of a map, an attempt to find one's own space:

“I use compasses as did ancient geographers, discoverers and leaders of campaigns of the past; I use it to measure distances. Albeit, its major, geometric

function is obvious. Therefore, I punch the needle in the place I am at now and, by the look of it, this is where I am to stay. I put the second arm in the place where I was born and spent most of my life. After all, this is the basic value when one attempts to reconcile one's biography with space. The distance between my birthplace Wołowiec and Warsaw is approximately 300 km. Obviously, I cannot resist the temptation to draw up a 300-kilometre circle around Wołowiec to determine my Central Europe. The line runs more or less through Brześć, Równe, Czernowiec, Cluj-Napoca, Arad, Szeged, Budapest, Żylin, Katowice, Częstochowa and ends where it begins, namely in Warsaw". This is how "the instinct of the inhabitant of a Central European plain is born", Stasiuk (2000: 86) writes in another fragment. The instinct manifests itself in the post-1989 literature by the birth of new awareness, a new identity – the Central European one. The sense of existing in between the East and the West does not disappear, yet the need to describe and encompass what is in the middle emerges. Books by Olga Tokarczuk (*E. E.; Dom dzienny, dom nocny; Ostatnie historie*), Joanna Bator, Stefan Chwin, Paweł Huelle, Kazimierz Orłoś (*Dom pod lutnią*), Krajewski's crime stories put the topic of Germans into a new framework; they are no longer enemies, but co-inhabitants, co-participants of the everyday life as well as victims of the same cruel history. This change of delivery keeps developing in all directions – Polish literature bears witness to the emergence of two kinds of curiosity: the curiosity of the Other who lives in our homeland and the curiosity of Others – the neighbouring states.

The former curiosity leads to the proliferation of images of multiethnic Poland, the need to dig down in the history of not so much the nation as the people, families and searching for Otherness – Silesian, Kashubian, Jewish etc. traces which contribute to shaping the cultural map of our country. It is no coincidence that among cities that are first to be mentioned in literary works created after 1989 there are Gdańsk, Wrocław or Szczecin, all of which are metropolises of wanderers, migrants and survivors. To name just a few examples of writers interested not in mass migrations, but in their existential ramifications, let me mention Paweł Huelle, Stefan Chwin, Olga Tokarczuk, Inga Iwasiów, Jerzy Pilch. They discover the new face of the everyday existence in Poland, its multicultural dimension, the spheres in which cultures and customs merge both in the contemporary world as well as in memory. The symbolic scene crowning this quest is the famous fragment of *Księgi Jakubowe* by Olga Tokarczuk (2014: 883), in which a young Polish female poet, Elżbieta Drużbacka, disembarks a carriage in a Rohatinian street and cries in despair "Does anybody speak Polish here?"

The images of atrophy of the everyday life, its chaos are also the images of helplessness of a human being and their sense of misplacement in the world. In *The rescue of Atlantis* by Zyta Oryszyn, post-war Poland is portrayed as a grotesque land of absurdity and its protagonists define it repeatedly in murky hues: “Poland is a lousy land [...] hunting is always in progress, somebody keeps chasing somebody; somebody keeps escaping somewhere” (Oryszyn, 2012: 8). The Cursed poet reiterates the words of Ms Szczęsna: “Poland is one big labyrinth. [...] A labyrinth of fear, degradation, humiliation, hopelessness, destitution. A labyrinth of death. But also a labyrinth of hope. You can get lost in it” (Oryszyn, 2012: 236). Oryszyn pens a peculiar chronicle of Poland’s Republic of People, precisely speaking its fragment – Lower Silesia, the region which has been widely appreciated lately by female-authored literature (Tokarczuk, Bator), as well as criminal prose (Krajewski). *Atlantis* also employs the borderlands of Lower Silesia, a region of dubious Polish-German ontology, which back in the 40s begins to be inhabited by people of shady biography and hidden identity (“There will be time for an identity” (Oryszyn, 2012: 139)). They carry other people’s names and surnames, misappropriate other people’s biographies, change nationalities, habits, hide their education, lose their own children and take in others’ progeny. Expelled from their houses, devoid of customs, professions, preferences, lacking in equipment, neighbors and their own past, they take over other exiles’ houses and their belongings; and it all happens in the majesty of the law of the People’s Republic of Poland. The reshuffles of history treating people like puppets deprive them of their ordinariness, settlement and doom them to the sense of temporariness – by means of eradicating their daily routines which they had grown accustomed to. We shall find the same experiences in the contemporary prose of the Balkan states as well as other Central European countries which witness Otherness in their communities.

The other trend of research into Central European issues in Polish prose are expeditions to other countries, exploring the space of the neighboring states in order to grasp their mentality, lifestyle, to experience the differences and admire the otherness. These include Marcin Szczygieł’s Czech reports, travel books by Andrzej Stasiuk, Marcin Wołek’s Russia, Inga Iwasiów’s Balkans and numerous others. However, in this case, the contact with the otherness takes a different form – it is more like growing accustomed to foreign and unknown space. A guest from Poland does not look for exoticism in Europe, but for familiarity that allows him to find himself in the new space. In Stasiuk’s prose this experience takes the form of overlapping images of the familiar Europe:



“I tried to look at the landscape, but a Serb or a Croatian was distracting me. He spoke as if he was at his place, as if time never existed, as if he was sitting somewhere in the shade, drinking, smoking and mouthing off about politics, the nature of the world and the automotive industry. Outside it was Bavarian November and I felt Balkan summer. It must have been Belgrade, Tivat, this kind of places and their typical garrulousness, idleness and impudence. [...]

I travelled across Germany carrying with me everything I had seen before. I had to take all these things with me in order to handle the 38 German cities. One has to visit Tulcza first to be able to deal with Frankfurt am Main, which you enter by train from the north only to see for five-six seconds an intersection of rail tracks, skyscrapers and a power plant. It is huge and mighty and ominously beautiful just like a Babylonian allegory. So as to emerge unscathed from this experience, one has to keep the image of a Romanian steppe in the heart” (Stasiuk, 2007: 8-9).

When the narrator decides to set off on his journey back, the problem, the place and space to grow accustomed to, thus painfully foreign, will be Russia...

### **Conclusion**

The topic of Central Europe is one of the key problems for contemporary Polish literature, as it defines the issues of social identity as well as both individual and collective self-identification. Unified, universal Europe, functioning more or less successfully politically speaking is an idea unable to bear the problem of cultural and national identity. The postcolonial reality so aptly and insightfully portrayed by Stasiuk in the quoted fragment requires some sort of grounding in the historical and cultural perspective, which does not eliminate but tames differences and foreignness, simultaneously allowing us to substantiate such frames of awareness as being a Pole or being a Central, Eastern, Western European or a Non-European in Europe. Dipesh Chakrabarty describes such awareness, putting forward a term of “provincialisation of Europe”. The Indian researcher writes:

“No concrete example of an abstract idea can be claimed to be the pure embodiment of the abstract. Therefore, no country serves as a model for another country, even though the discussion on modernity, which revolves around the notion of ‘keeping up’ promotes exactly such models. There isn’t any “slyness of mind” which will guarantee that all of us reach the same final point in history

despite obvious historical differences. The historical differences dividing us actually do make a difference” (Chakabarty, 2011: 13-14).

The concept of provincialisation of Europe proposed by Chakrabarty is an attempt to “discover how and in what sense the universal European ideas were derived from very specific intellectual and historical traditions” (Chakabarty, 2011: 14). In this endeavor to unearth the following layers of a pyramid, literary works play a pivotal role – they show this provincial aspect of perceiving Europe, they include insights and thoughts not entirely merged yet, but already tangled into a larger picture.

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## OPASKE O SREDIŠNJOJ EUROPI U SUVREMENOJ POLJSKOJ PROZI

### Sažetak

Tema Središnje Europe je jedan od ključnih problema za suvremenu poljsku književnost, budući da definira pitanja društvenog identiteta, kao i individualne i kolektive samostalne identifikacije. Kao „posrednica“ između dvije velike sfere utjecaja, Rusije i Njemačke – Istoka i Zapada – Poljska je lišena svoje državnosti od druge polovice 18. stoljeća i bila je mjesto na kojem se te dvije sfere stalno sudaraju. Percepcija Poljske kao granice između utjecaja, povijesnog štita Zapada, grudobrana zapadne kulture ili zemlje iza Željezne zavjese nije ojačala vezu između njene kulture i Središnje Europe. Željezna zavjesa je ojačala polarizaciju u Središnjoj Europi nakon Drugog svjetskog rata i poljska književnost primjećuje ovu pukotinu u dva smisla – kronološkom i prostornom.

**Ključne riječi:** Središnja Europa, suvremena poljska proza, identitet, granica, zapad i istok