

Conference in Passau 15-18 2009 **Contemporary  
Polish Migrant Culture in Germany, Ireland and the  
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Displacement, Emigration and Travelling  
Polish Contemporary Literature and the Notion of  
Émigré literature

Introduction

Coming back seems to be just as undividable part of emigration as the leaving, abandoning home is. This is how it is described in Izabela Filipiak's 1995 novel *Niebieska menażeria* (The Blue Menagerie). At the very first page we meet the young woman, the main character and, at the same time, the narrator of the stories that constitute the hybrid-novel<sup>1</sup> at the moment of coming back to Poland from emigration:<sup>2</sup>

Jesień. Właśnie wróciłam do Polski. Powrót nie jest rzeczą, którą przeżywa się za jednym zamachem, wraca się i jest po wszystkim, i — już się jest. Nie, wraca się warstwami, coraz to głębszą warstwą, do szpiku kości, do bólu i oszołomienia. W ten sposób też się rozstaje. Odrywając po kawałku to, co było w nas wspólne, należało do nas i innych ludzi, do nas i innego miejsca (1997: 5)

[Autumn. I have just come back to Poland. Coming back is not an easy thing, which one can easily experience, just like that. You come back and that's it. And

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<sup>1</sup>The novel consists of several short stories that are connected with the same character/narrator and — even though can be read separately — in fact constitute the coherent novel plot (Chowaniec 2000).

<sup>2</sup> I write about Filipiak's novel at length in the article "Towards a fast-food reality: The 1990s and the Transformations in Polish Literature." To be published at Aleksanteri Institute, Helsinki 2009.

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you are. No, one comes back with one layer after the other; each one is deeper, until the core of you bones, until the pain, and the forgetfulness. One leaves in the same way. Ripping away, piece after the piece, what was common, what belong to both, to us and the place]

Going away and coming back, the experience of displacement is not an instantaneous, an immediate experience. One has to abandon the inhabited and domesticate space (which is always a disturbing experience even if this space may not be a friendly and cosy one) and expose oneself to the psychological, existential and physical foreign. Indeed, the physicality of the space plays a vital role, primarily because of its connection with our embodied existence and embodied experience of the space.

Filipiak's novel is not a rare case of the migrants' narration. Polish postmodernity<sup>3</sup> (ponowoczesność) (Bauman 2004), this new post-1989 reality has given a good background for the tales of the voluntary or economically stimulated dislocation, what gave birth to new characters in Polish literature.<sup>4</sup> These are not happy narratives, as we probably can guess, as trip, going away, or coming back is commonly known metaphor for suffering, disturbance or illness (Sontag 1991). The exile, the dislocation were often accompanied with pictures of distressed body, the suffering body. This connection between the physical body of the

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<sup>3</sup> The postmodern discourse in Polish intellectual debate in 1990s was "entangled with the incipient themes of 'media society' (Guy Debord), 'consumer society' (Henri Lefebvre), 'late capitalist society' (Jean-François Lyotard), 'post-industrial society' (Daniel Bell), and the feminist discourse on equality. 'In the traumatic whirl of transformation – writes Halina Janaszek-Ivaničková – which is an integral part of the global world, the particular kind of both: the culture and the man – the man of the post-modern, post-industrial, and worldwide civilisation appeared' (from my article, Aleksanteri Institute Press, 2009); especially volume "Mniejszości" (Minorities).

<sup>4</sup> Short article on the contemporary emigration literature and its romantic roots: Urszula Chowanec, Między Soplicowem a global nation in "Nowy Czas", Londyn , May 3, 2008, <http://www.nowyczas.co.uk/2008/05/miedzy-soplicowem-a-global-nation/>

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emigrant and the loved space (fatherland, motherland) has been particularly vivid in literature during the time of romanticism (Siwicka, Bieńczyk 1995) as well as in literature after the second world war. Twentieth century émigré writers such as Maria Kuncewiczowa, Czesław Miłosz, Witold Gombrowicz, Stanisław Barańczak, Adam Zagajewski frequently tried to situate themselves in relations to their mother tongue, their living conditions abroad, and the status of being an émigré (Filipowicz 1989, Danilewicz-Zielińska 1999), which hardly ever was described as easy and happy.

Nevertheless, despite Filipiak's case, I - while talking about the contemporary Polish literature and the notion of emigration – with suspicion think of the question whether there is still being written Polish émigré literature. And in this place, I add hastily, repeating after Jerzy Jarzębski, that writers such as Witold Gombrowicz, Czesław Miłosz, Jerzy Stempowski, Józef Wittlin, Stanisław Vincez, Andrzej Bobkowski, Gustaw Herling-Grudziński were rather the émigré rebels ('emigracyjni buntownicy' in 1998 book *Pożegnanie z emigracją*); far the homogeneous in any way group. Bearing in mind that actual correlations between emigration, migration and literary activity have always been very complex, it is fair to say, I believe, that the émigré literature as a term has always been politically determined with the main assumption behind it that the émigré writer was rather forced to than chose to leave her/his country.<sup>5</sup> As such, the notion of emigration is still present in women's writing during the first half of the 1990s. But this writing, while entering into the

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<sup>5</sup> Jerzy Jarzębski writes that among the characteristics of Polish literature is „obciążenie ponad miarę społecznymi serwitutami” (p. 7). And about post 1989 émigré writers “Ci młodszy emigrantami już w ogóle nie byli — przynajmniej nigdy w takich kategoriach nie ujmowano twórczości mieszkających na stałe lub przejściowo za granicą Jerzego Łukosza, Manieli Gretkowskiej, Marka Jastrzębca-Mosakowskiego...” (Jarzębski 1998: 242).

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literary debate with the intellectual heritage of the émigré literature, tries to break up with the crucial political and national paradigm of displacement. Manuela Gretkowska in her 1995 novel *My zdes' emigranty* parodies the politically engaged emigration of the 1980s. She sketches a character that deliberately rejects any links between her life, her geographical choice and the political situation of her native country.

W arabskim sklepiku na mojej ulicy uchodzę za Rosjankę, bo gdybym na pytanie ciekawskiego sprzedawcy powiedziała, że jestem Polką, Arab pokiwałby głową, że wie, gdzie jest Polska, że Wałęsa, że Jaruzelski. A mnie nie interesuje ani Jaruzelski, ani Wałęsa (p. 38)

[They think I am Russian in the Arab shop on my street. If I told the curious shopkeeper that I am Polish, he would nod that he knows where Poland is, that Wałęsa, that Jaruzelski... And I am not interested either in Jaruzelski or Wałęsa]

*I am not interested either in Jaruzelski or Wałęsa...* Such position of the female character who later devotes herself to writing a thesis on Maria Magdalena can be seen as a generational statement of women writers, who would shift their interest away from the culturally centralized theme (such as politics, men, Christ's suffering and its connection to national struggle), to the cultural margins (such as private experience, women, or suffering of Maria Magdalena). But this personalized experience of exile should not be taken as an individual experience. It is perhaps the most universal experience of being a foreigner, a stranger (Kristeva 1991). The notion of emigration within the literary domain brings up today, not only the politically determined problems such as nationality, obtaining new visa and necessity to act in the foreign language, but also—in more general terms—the notion of being a foreigner. The foreigner is bound at some point to be (or to feel) lonely, misunderstood, and rejected. In this perspective, the re-thinking of the interconnection between the notion of migration, exile, emigration and contemporary Polish writing is and will always be significant.

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In this paper I intend to show selected example of Polish women's writing from the 1990s to the present time, in which the notion of emigration (exile, trip, move, and displacement) was captured. I want to show how the notion of emigration evolved in women's writing of 1990s and 2000s (in writing by Izabela Filipiak, Manuela Gretkowska, Olga Tokarczuk, Grażyna Przystupa and Joanna Pawluśkiewicz ). Many descriptions of touring, visiting new places, short term working abroad or the images of different countries — freely chosen to live — appear intensively in Polish literature after 1989. These experiences of migration have been scrutinized by women's writers and I wish to present three especially important shifts in the cultural understanding of migration (displacement) that seem to emerge from this scrutiny:

1. the shift from the notion of the stable identity to the variable identity, dependable on place, cultural neighbourhood and — what probably the most important — language;
2. the shift from narrative of locality to the one of glocality, where the known and cosy mix with the global elements;
3. the shift from the universalized experience of emigration or migration to the gendered experience of displacement, where the feminine aspect is emphasized.

I will use the Julia Kristeva notion of exclusion as a source of identity to describe the experience of emigration in Polish women's writing. Consequently I will examine the abovementioned shifts on the selected women's novels and short stories.

**For a whole article see Publication of University of Passau.**