

Elżbieta Rybicka

Illustrations: Anna Zabdyrska

GLOBAL AND LOCAL

Spatial Experience in Polish Literature after 2000

A NEW CARTOGRAPHY

Thinking about space in Polish literature evolved greatly after 1989. The first phase of this evolution, back in the 1990s, may be described as the discovery of a new map. This was no longer the old political map, on which the whole country was marked in one colour, but a map of multi-ethnicity and multi-nationality, in which various tints overlapped in various areas, blending into multicolour patches. The second significant process happening in the 1990s was the creation of a new, symbolic geography – decentralised, and openly endorsing peripheral, trans-border spaces. With the new cartography came new ideas, and perhaps the most important of these was the concept of open regionalism, proposed in the circles of the “Borussia” Cultural Community in Olsztyn. First and foremost, it suggested a new spatial model and identity related thereto – not a national, but a multinational identity, which at the same time focused on relationships between different nationalities. This process of decentralisation and endorsement had its

counterpart in the literature of the period: the literature of what is known as “little homelands”.

The decade that followed, however, brought some important transformations. It seems that the key, decisive element was thorough and downright criticism of “little homelands” literature, on the part of both writers and literary critics. Why was it criticised? Mostly for its escapism – a departure from the chaotic and confusing present into the nostalgically evoked past, but also for mythologizing the community of “neighbours”, and finally, for assuming that a person’s place of birth, of origin, determines his or her identity, and the stability thereof. In the contemporary literary and critical consciousness the category of “little homeland” received a lasting connotation with regressive, closed regionalism, based on essentialist identity, bound to the land, and rooted in it.

The change in thinking about space was nevertheless also related to the new cohorts

of writers born in the 1970s joining literary circulation. These young literati experienced space differently. They opted for the universal rather than the local, and certainly against “little homelands” and the idea of roots. All these notions came to be associated with the provincial, the parochial, and above all, with an anachronous model of both literature and identity. Perhaps the strongest derogatory voice sounded in the 2006 novel *Niehalo* (Uncool) by Ignacy Karpowicz, which presented a grotesque picture of Białystok, no longer as a multi-cultural, trans-border space, but rather as a battlefield between Polish catholic gangs versus Euro-enthusiasts.

Seeing that the model based on the narrative formula of roots had played out, and familial places proved to be not so much a multi-cultural utopia as an oppressive limitation, the situation required the quest to be continued. The new decade brought several plots – by Joanna Bator, Grzegorz Kopaczewski, Ignacy Karpowicz, Hubert Klimko-Dobrzaniecki – written from a patently different perspec-

tive. The young writers were taking off into the world.

COSMOPOLIS

The protagonist of *Kobieta* (A Woman) by Joanna Bator is living in a cosmopolis. Whether she is in New York or in Warsaw her world is filled with the props of an intellectual, with *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, with *écriture féminine*, with melancholy and psychoanalysis. Her living space is devoid of obvious local landmarks, whilst the descriptions of New York are little different from those of Warsaw. What is essential here is not place or places, but the potentiality of free movement and travel. The protagonist's friend, on learning of another planned trip, offers a revealing diagnosis: "You have no roots [...], only a spiritual pseudopod, like an amoeba, by which you attach yourself to the surface for a while."¹ The metaphor of temporary pseudopodia, which replace the former roots, is the best expression of the new attitude towards space, which is associated not with belonging, but with a temporary place of residence. Significantly, uprooting is in no way linked to a sense of loss.

The protagonists of Grzegorz Kopaczewski's novel entitled *Global Nation. Obrazki z czasów popkultury* (Global Nation. A Scrapbook of Pop Culture) live in a similar world, London being a cosmopolis in which near-identical young people meet, listen to the same music, watch the same TV series. The city in this case is primarily a space of flow; twenty-somethings from all over the world drop by here on the way to somewhere, running

¹ J. Bator, *Kobieta*, Warszawa 2002, p. 232.



away from a job in a corporation, or procrastinating and postponing the definition of their lifetime projects. Young people come to London for a year or longer, and then they move on; they are not tourists, and they do not engage in sightseeing rituals, they all live in the rhythm of work in fast-food joints and the rhythm of rewinding.

Hubert Klimko-Dobrzaniecki, who debuted in 2003 with a collection of stories *Stacja Bielawa Zachodnia* (Bielawa West Station) describing a Lower Silesian, post-German little town, in his second book, a diptych entitled *Dom Róży. Krysuvík* (Róža's House. Krýsuvík), [tu chyba powinny być znaki diakrytyczne: Krýsuvík] moved the setting to Iceland. The narrator does not see much difference between north Reykjavik, and the Lower Silesian hamlet, with the same concrete architecture towering over both.

The spaces of cosmopolis featured in these novels are not only global cities but also, even mostly, the spaces of transit and flow: of people, cultural phenomena, objects and commodities, ideas and concepts since, characteristically, the novels' protagonists inhabit mostly the space of culture. In the case of Bator, this is a sophisticated, intellectual culture: Freud, Lacan, Kristeva, Barthes, Irigaray; the post-modern canon. The heroine does not have a language of her own, instead she speaks a trans-national, if feminised, *pidgin*. In the *global nation*, this is the language of popular culture, TV series, music, video clips, MTV; the common, trans-national idiom of the global world. This does not signify acceptance thereof, as the novel is plainly critical, even anti-global. All the same, it proves that the most cosmopolitan space today is the space of pop culture, which inspires identical reactions in its recipients throughout the



world – reactions of either mindless absorption, or conscious protestation.

It would seem, therefore, that rootlessness is not an issue for the new generation of writers. The space through which they build their “identity” is that of a cosmopolitan, multicultural, global city; alternatively, it merely covers the experience of travel and mobility itself. Yet it is worth asking what kind of “identity” that is. The inverted commas here signal doubt and point to the changes in the self-creation model. If the living space of writers and their protagonists is the cosmopolis, the city of flow, then this fact is of great consequence for the change in the way of thinking about identity: it is no longer focused on genealogy, on the place of origin, on the search for sameness and continuity. I would argue that the outline of “identity” which emerges in these circumstances is more akin to a non-place, the space of flow, as defined by Marc Augé.² It is transitive in character, and it has less to do with settling down; it is a space where different languages, cultures, and places meet and mix. Therefore in the cosmopolis, a new type of transitive identity develops, while nationality is replaced with the *global nation*, the

² M. Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, New York 1995.

new cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitanism of either the fast-food or the critical kind.

Therefore, whereas the first stage of reformulating identity was marked by the discovery of the multi-national, in seemingly homogenous national spaces, the second – emblematic for the youngest generation of writers – revealed the open-endedness of space and the discovery of the trans-national, which are characteristic of the travel experience.

RETURNS?

And yet the years 2008 and 2009 saw several unexpected returns. In her book *Piaskowa Góra* (Sandy Hill), Joanna Bator returned to her hometown of Wałbrzych, a city of the displaced, of people arriving voluntarily from all over Poland, of Greek immigrants who received the status of political refugees in Poland, and last but not least, a city upon which its former German inhabitants left their mark. She returned in order to create an epic, slightly grotesque saga portraying the confused and intertwined fortunes of the town’s people. Grzegorz Kopaczewski moves from the cosmopolitan London to Katowice for his second novel – *Huta* (Foundry) – in which he describes a futurist, social dystopia, albeit firmly set in the Silesian reality.

Ignacy Karpowicz, following the sneering satire on his hometown in *Niehalo*, and a post-tourist chronicle of a trip to Ethiopia, returns to Białystok in the novel titled *Gesty* (Gestures), to take stock of his protagonist’s life. After the Icelandic *Dom Róży*, Hubert Klimko-Dobrzaniecki publishes *Rzeczy pierwsze* (First Things), a fictional autobiography in which he returns to the city whence he had formerly escaped. Inga Iwasiów, in her *Bambino*, constructs a multidimensional local narrative telling the story of traumatic deportations and forced relocations from post-war Szczecin. Nearly every one of these books speaks of a peculiar, atopic experience – the concurrent feeling of not-being-there, not belonging, and of the sheer inability to leave the place. In this new, external perspective, the hometowns of Wałbrzych, Białystok, Bielawa, and Poland as a whole, must again be recounted, accounted for, and verified. They bring home the realisation of distance, and at the same time they are a constant reminder of one’s point of origin. Joanna Bator may have expressed it best when she admitted in an interview:

Virginia Woolf once said that, as a woman, she has no need for a home country – because the whole world may be her country. It was no problem for me to make myself

at home in the world, while this original homeland: Piaskowa Góra, Wałbrzych, Poland – this felt uncomfortable. [...] My home country is my challenge; I have this love-hate mindset about it. It took living outside Poland for seven years for me to feel that this is where I came from. Men are from Mars, women are from Venus, and I am from Wałbrzych. This is my beginning; this is where my lineage came from.³

This ambivalent experience once again provokes questions as to a formula for the relationship between identity and space, especially that the return to the place of origin was only momentary – both the writers, and their protagonists took off again very soon, on another journey. In her 2010 novel called *Chmurdalia* (Cloudalia), Joanna Bator provides a contemporary, feminine reinterpretation of the *Odyssey*, whose heroines – Dominika and Sara from *Piaskowa Góra*, subsequent incarnations of a Hottentot Venus – are living the lives of eternal wanderers. Characteristically, Bator turns the Homeric version around: the women are not longing for a return to the symbolic Ithaca, but their energy is fuelled by the desire to escape their family home, to run away from clearly defined life projects, from the determination of provenance. Bator's novel lists a collection of diverse types of 20th-century wanderers – from Jewish exiles like Icek Kac and Eulalia Barron, who live in New York solely on memories of the past, to Polish economic emigrants. Also, it makes an important distinction between floating adrift without

purpose versus intentional choice of life in a never-ending journey. Dominika does not want to have a home, because she does not want to belong or to be clearly defined, she does not want to be set in social and family frames, does not want to plan her future and its goals. Towards the end of the novel, however, she becomes aware that you do not escape your home country while “dragging it behind you like a cat drags a tin stuck to its tail.”⁴

NOMADISM

How, therefore, to describe the relationship between people and place/space? The traditional version would use the perspective of roots: in that case, identity is firmly linked to the place we come from and in which we live – place understood in both geographic and socio-cultural terms. Note, however: that version had already been questioned by contemporary culture, with its identifying marks of modernisation, of migrations both internal (from the countryside and periphery to the cities) and external (political and economic). Modern man, after all, was a man displaced. The 20th century brought with it a version of uprooted identity akin to alienation, nostalgically reminiscing upon the lost ties with place. The latest trends, on the other hand – present in literature, but also elsewhere, in other areas – would speak of a new way of experiencing places, and identities attached to them. Probably the most apt term for this is “the nomadic subject” as defined by Rosi Braidotti.⁵ Noma-

dism is an existential situation, and more: it is a particular kind of critical sensibility, which objects to being locked within clearly demarcated borders – either territorial or social. The nomad's identity is never bound to a particular location; instead, it is a chart on which particular destinations have been marked, while the trajectory of life they delineate is a succession of displacements and differences. As a result, the nomadic experience creates an identity in constant flux, an unfinished, open identity of transgression, that is an identity forever directed at crossing borders; finally, an identity with no particular aim or goal.

Unlike the modern “homeless” man, the nomad carries his makeshift “home” along with him, and therefore he does not suffer from the nostalgic syndrome so typical of the former experience of migrants or exiles. What seems essential, particularly in relation to the work by young Polish writers, is the fact that local and global spaces are not mutually exclusive. One can be a nomad, carrying one's local experiences like a tent all around the world. Locality therefore becomes a component of the cosmopolitan identity. An important component, since it adds the difference necessary to provide an alternative to the process of global unification. And although the nomadic identity is born in the world of globalisation, it does not replicate homogeneity – most importantly because it builds a specific sort of tension and connection between the local and the global.

³ <http://www.repka.pl/Czytelnia/Kultura/-Piaskowa-Gora-.aspx> (accessed: 8 April 2010).

⁴ J. Bator, *Chmurdalia*, Warszawa 2010, p. 406.

⁵ R. Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects. Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. Chicago 1994.

TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH BY DOROTA WAŚIK