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## “The Last One Turns the Light off”. Polish Prose after the Year 2000 in the Context of EU Migration

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**Abstract:** This article focuses on the emigration/migration issue depicted in Polish literature written after the year 2000. The examples discussed prove that we are dealing with two variants in the depiction of emigrants' experience. On the one hand, we can talk about a positive pattern where emigration is treated as an adventure, perceived as breaking free from the existing obligations and imposed rigours. On the other hand, one may find several negative patterns, in which emigration is a necessary evil. The author notices a clear gender difference in the presentation of the emigrant experience: male narratives tend to be more depressing, presenting the protagonists as degenerated and humiliated, while female authors drift towards “chick lit,” depicting their protagonists as developing professionally and emotionally.

**Keywords:** emigration, migration, Polish prose, gender

From today's perspective, we can observe in Polish written works published after the year 2000 “a rediscovery of the critical and persuasive potential grounded in literature [...] social and political engagement gets back into favour.”<sup>1</sup> One of the most burning Polish social problems of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is economic emigration/migration, to Great Britain and Ireland, in particular. The heating of sociological discussions with media reports, e.g. “two million of the most talented have left,” results in the constant presence of that issue in our public life.<sup>2</sup> The question arises, then, how Polish writers approach the problem and in what way our literature deals with the depiction of the emigrant experience of the “EU era.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> D. Nowacki, *Kto im dał skrzydła. Uwagi o prozie, dramacie i krytyce (2001-2010)*, Katowice: “Śląsk,” Uniwersytet Śląski, 2012, p. 94. All the quotations from the Polish sources have been translated by Elżbieta Rokosz.

<sup>2</sup> There are numerous blogs and photoblogs on everyday life, written by “common” people, who live abroad. See J. Żulczyk, “Piszę do ciebie z Wysp,” *Kultura* [Dziennik supplement], 16 November 2007, pp. 66–67.

<sup>3</sup> In the cases described here, we deal not so much with emigration, but rather with migration, which means a change of the place of living. Wojciech Browarny claimed that

Do we deal only with “dishwasher’s reports” and description of everyday struggle with reality, or do the writers try to – skilfully or less so – play with the emigrant schemata? Such questions seem to be justified in the context of the numerous volumes of prose published during the last few years, touching upon those very problems. Those include, among others: *Global nation. Obrazki z czasów popkultury* [Global nation. Pictures from the time of pop culture] (2004) by Grzegorz Kopaczewski, *Anioły i świnię. W Berlinie!* [Angels and swine. In Berlin!] (2005) by Brygida Helbig, *Pani na domkach* [A lady of the houses] (2006) by Joanna Pawluśkiewicz, *Hotel Irlandia* [The Ireland Hotel] (2006) by Joanna Słabuszewska-Krauze, *Dublin. Moja polska karma* [Dublin. My Polish karma] (2007) by Magdalena Orzeł, *Zajezdnia Londyn* [The London Depot] (2007) by Aleksander Kropiwnicki, *Socjopata w Londynie* [A sociopath in London] (2008) by Daniel Koziarski, *Egri bikaver* (2009) by Łukasz Suskiewicz, *Karpie, labędzie i Big Ben* [Carp, swans and Big Ben] (2009) by Ada Martynowska, *Polska szkoła boksu. Powieść emigracyjna* [The Polish school of boxing. An emigrant novel] (2009) by Adama Miklasz, *Przebiegum życiae czyli kartonowa sieć* [Life course or a cardboard network] (2009) and *Międzynaród* [Internation] (2011) by Piotr Czerwiński, *Przystupa* (2007) and *Nielegalne związki* [Illegal liaisons] (2010) by Grażyna Plebanek, *Irlandzki koktajl* [An Irish cocktail] (2010) by Gosia Brzezińska, *Klub Matek Swatek. Operacja: Londyn* [Mothers-match-makers’ club. Operation: London] (2011) by Ewa Stec or *Afrykańska elektronika* [African electronics] (2013) by Jana Krasnowolski.

Acquaintance with those novels reveals that there are, generally speaking, two variants. The first, a less frequent “positive” pattern, treats emigration as a kind of adventure, perceived as a release from the so far imposed obligations and rigours. It would be a sort of “stalling for time with life.”<sup>4</sup> For example, in Łukasz Suskiewicz’s *Egri bikaver* we can read about a young girl, who:

“Regarding contemporary Polish writers residing (or staying temporarily) abroad we use the term ‘emigration’ with a reservation that their output does not really correspond with the traditional schemata and motifs of Polish literature ‘in exile.’” W. Browarny, *Opowieści niedyskretne. Formy autorefleksyjne w polskiej prozie lat dziewięćdziesiątych*, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2002, p. 177. See: M. Błędowska, “Uchodźcy, półemigranci, kosmopolici. Doświadczenie emigracyjne w prozie lat dziewięćdziesiątych (M. Gretkowska, J. Rudnicki),” in: *Literatura utracona, poszukiwana czy odzyskana. Wokół problemów emigracji*, edited by Z. Andres, J. Wolski, Rzeszów: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego, 2003; K. Krowiranda, “Wizerunek polskiego emigranta w polskiej prozie lat 90. Natasza Goerke, Manuela Gretkowska,” in: *Pisarz na emigracji. Mitologie. Style. Strategie przetrwania*, edited by H. Gosk, A.S. Kowalczyk, Warszawa: “Elipsa,” 2005; J. Pasterska, “Problematyka polskiej prozy (e)migracyjnej po roku 2000. Rekonesans,” in: *Polonistyka w Europie. Kierunki i perspektywy rozwoju*, edited by G. Filip, J. Pasterska, M. Patro-Kucab, Rzeszów: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> P. Czerwiński, *Przebiegum życiae czyli kartonowa sieć*, Warszawa: “Świat Książki,” 2009, p. 263.

was squeaking that she had never felt so good. She does not have a job, but she feels absolutely great. There are ten of them living together and everyday somebody brings some wine or cigarettes. It's so cool. So much different from what it was like at home. She can sleep as long as she wants. She can go to parties. And return in the morning. [...] I have met also those, who got settled. They are easy to recognise, because they are calm. They are not running around the city, they are not afraid of their own shadow, but were doing their job.<sup>5</sup>

Another – much more frequent – pattern presents emigration as a “necessary evil.” The narrator in *Polska szkoła boksu* by Adam Miklasz is trying to convince us that: “The world encountered in England was for me only an unpleasant mock-up, an obligatory labour camp, a prison, in which I could be staying for a few months to complete the simplest task to scrape together as much, as possible.”<sup>6</sup> That might be the reason why the writers – in most of the cases – use the 19th-century-like realism, limiting themselves to reporting descriptions, exhibiting a journalistic flair. There is no space there for revealing the so far, hidden truth (the “whole” truth about what “it is really like there”). As a result, most of the texts have been dominated by “epic naivety together with equally naive interventionism.”<sup>7</sup>

The image of the Polish diaspora, which emerges from the above-mentioned narratives, is not surprising. Focused on making money, our countrymen are envious and have minimalist needs. They are paid peanuts, doing the most menial jobs. “They hole up in overcrowded flats, buy only expired spam and stale bread at ASDA,”<sup>8</sup> without pondering upon their exiled lives. Those stories will not be so much about the defining and redefining of national identity – as it was, for example, in the prose of Zbigniew Kruszyński, Janusz Rudnicki or Bronisław Świdorski – but about criticism of consumerism and feminism.<sup>9</sup> The writers will reflect on the dramatic everyday reality of an emigrant, pushing aside the broadly defined problems with identity. It is so, among others, because we can find intensification, diversification, globalisation and feminisation among the factors which – according to Stephen Castels – influence contemporary emigration.<sup>10</sup> As a result, protagonists of those novels and short stories decide to go abroad, first of all, to improve their material and social status. Sometimes they have higher education, have some

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<sup>5</sup> Ł. Suskiewicz, *Eqri bikaver*, Szczecin, Bezrzecze 2009, p. 28. The fact that sometimes Poles are successful was also written about by Piotr Czerwiński, who reminded the readers that such disproportions could be found anywhere: “In the *bajabongo* world there are many Poles, who have succeeded tremendously. And a hundred times more of such guys like us, who not necessarily have succeeded. Wait a minute, isn't that the same in Poland?” P. Czerwiński, op. cit., p. 262.

<sup>6</sup> A. Miklasz, *Polska szkoła boksu. Powieść emigracyjna*, Kraków: Księgarnia Wydawnictwo Skrzat Stanisław Porębski, 2009, p. 61.

<sup>7</sup> D. Nowacki, “Przebiegum życia,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 10 October 2009.

<sup>8</sup> J. Krasnowolski, “Kindoki,” in: idem, *Afrykańska elektronika*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo i Księgarnia Korporacja Ha!art, 2013, p. 186.

<sup>9</sup> See: J. Pastorska, op. cit., pp. 306–307.

<sup>10</sup> S. Castels, “The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World,” [www.palgrave.com](http://www.palgrave.com) [Accessed on 13 December 2013].

(better or worse) command of English, stay in touch with their relatives and friends who stayed at home. They can relatively quickly adjust themselves to the multicultural environment. Nevertheless, the writers continue the narratives of “the antiheroic exile epic,”<sup>11</sup> presenting the lots of people, who rarely achieve the desired success. The dream of a “better” life and a career “from rags to riches”<sup>12</sup> very quickly turns into a nightmare, the main source of which is exploitation and humiliation at a workplace. Poles “brush toilets or wash the dishes, or lay bricks, and in the evening as if going through some anointing, they wash themselves for a change, dress up like peacocks and go out like fake intellectuals, whom they are not anymore and never will be.”<sup>13</sup> They try to stay “in shape” and deceive themselves, first of all, to uphold a sense of pride and to see the sense of their own existence. Hardly ever protagonists of those texts conclude the way the narrator of *Pani na domkach* by Pawлуśkiewicz does. She believes that “it is wrong to agree voluntarily to be a slave. That’s why one has to leave.”<sup>14</sup> Much more frequently life abroad is filled with monotony and physical exhaustion. However, “[the low-paid manual work, that an average Brit would spitefully reject, provided an emigrant with a steady income and an impression of stability.”<sup>15</sup> To get any kind of work one has to lie and appear as less competent than he or she actually is. As a result, as one of the protagonists of Czerwiński’s *Przebiegum życia* will say that “[this country is a utopia [...] Toilet cleaners with Ph.Ds., and managers, who did not make it through high school.”<sup>16</sup> No wonder that the country in which everything seems upside down appears as a hostile space.

I tell you, it is like diving headfirst into cold water. You scream like a new-born, freeze like frozen food and are-born-die-are-born-die twenty times. Your balls shrink to the size of a nut, and your bladder turns into a freezer, no wonder you run back and forth to the loo. And you close your eyes and clench your fists so tight, that you get a headache as if your head was to explode. And you try desperately to stay on the surface, so you flap your hands like mad.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, everybody tries to manage somehow. They try different occupations, including taking advantage of other people’s misfortune. One such example comes from the title short story included in Jan Krasnowolski’s collection *Afrykańska elektronika*, in which there is a thriving partnership enterprise run by a Pole and an African, whose business consists in killing wrong-doers to order, by means of voodoo. Well, Poles have always been resourceful... What limits them, however, and cuts them down is not so much the hard reality, but also tradition connected with deeply rooted

<sup>11</sup> P. Śliwiński, *Przygody z wolnością. Uwagi o poezji współczesnej*, Kraków: Znak, 2002, pp. 18–19.

<sup>12</sup> A. Miklasz, op. cit., p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> P. Czerwiński, op. cit., p. 225.

<sup>14</sup> J. Pawлуśkiewicz, *Pani na domkach*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo i Księgarnia Korporacja Ha!art, 2006, p. 154.

<sup>15</sup> A. Miklasz, op. cit., p. 30.

<sup>16</sup> P. Czerwiński, op. cit., p. 89.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

complexes. The protagonist of Magdalena Orzeł’s novel *Dublin. Moja polska karma* concludes:

Initially the praise surprises, because Poles abroad still are perceived as thieves and proles, without a word, but not without a drink. And out of the sudden, some specialists have arrived – build roads, provide treatment and professional anaesthetics in hospitals, design, write doctoral dissertations, lay bricks professionally and are skilful plumbers [...] And this is what we are justly praised, paid and invited for. And that immediately makes us sneer. Well, we, Poles, are simply outstanding! It is obvious that without us not only Dublin but Europe in general just would not make it. We, Poles – always some kind of bulwark, foundation and support! We, Poles, with the deeply hidden complex of Europe.<sup>18</sup>

That complex<sup>19</sup> makes Poles, thinking “I am just a Pole,<sup>20</sup> “We are Poles. We are here to clean their toilets and pick cigarette butts from the lawns,”<sup>21</sup> try to “melt” into the climate that surrounds them and constantly convince themselves about their own value, while still thinking stereotypically about other nations. Usually, they bolster their confidence by humiliating others and that has been reflected in creating pejorative, humorous or vulgar names such as *Kebab*, *Angol*, *Portugalec*, *Grekus* and *Alban*, *Pepik*, *Makaroniarz*, *Żabojad*, *Bambus* or *kitajec*, *żółtek*, *ciapaty*, *smoluch* and *brudas*, and *flegma*.<sup>22</sup> There have been cases of extreme backwardness, primitivism or racism. Such forms of behaviour were to make Polish emigrants feel better.

The fact that the depiction of the (e)migration of the EU era is based on schematic clichés and stereotypes can be explained – as it is, for example, in Czerwiński’s *Przebieg życia* – by the urge to stress the sense of the absurd. Since, as Jarosław Wach claimed, referring to that novel, “the world has turned out to be a place so unpleasant and so absurdly organised, that neither its existence nor one’s own can be treated seriously,”<sup>23</sup> the only way to defend oneself is through irony and ridiculing everything that is happening.

<sup>18</sup> M. Orzeł, *Dublin – moja polska karma*, Kraków: Księgarnia Wydawnictwo Skrzat Stanisław Porębski, 2007, p. 57.

<sup>19</sup> That complex has been built up by state institutions, which, for example, in the forms including “racial affiliation” introduced a new race “Eastern European” – “Poles, Czechs and Slovaks and, in general, all that Slavdom are mentally and racially different from the rest of civilised Europe and do not deserve to be identified with ordinary, true Europeans.” A. Miklasz, op. cit., p. 25.

<sup>20</sup> P. Czerwiński, op. cit., p. 299.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 262.

<sup>22</sup> See, e.g. A. Miklasz, op. cit., p. 45-46 and J. Krasnowolski, “Afrykańska elektronika,” in: idem, *Afrykańska elektronika*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo i Księgarnia Korporacja Ha!art, 2013, p. 71.

The pejorative terms would refer in most cases to the following nations and ethnic groups: *Kebab* – Arabs or Turks, *Angol* – an English person, *Portugalec* – a Portuguese person, *Grekus* – a Greek, *Alban* – an Albanian, *Pepik* – a Czech, *Makaroniarz* – an Italian (a pasta-eater), *Żabojad* – a French person (a frog-eater), *Bambus* – an African (a bamboo), *kitajec* and *żółtek* – a Chinese person, *ciapaty* – an Arab, *smoluch* and *brudas* – most likely an Arab or an African, *flegma* – an English person [the translator’s footnote].

<sup>23</sup> J. Wach, “Sen wariata tudzież marne losy polskich emigrantów,” <http://www.akcentpismo.pl/pliki/nr4.10/wach.html> [accessed: 18. 10. 2014].

However, in the themes and narratives, shown in Polish emigrant experience in the Polish literature written after the year 2000 we can observe a gender division.<sup>24</sup> One of the examples comes from *Polska szkoła boksu* by Miklasz, in which we can find a summary of typical behavioural characteristics for men and women living abroad:

There were also Polish women, with chameleon-like speed absorbing the rules which apply to the new, better world is guided by, its trends and the manner of existence in the society of *übermensch*. They ran rings around their colleagues from other countries – not as easy and cheap as some other girls from behind the Eastern border, more ladylike and selective than English girls, they were not looking for a momentary pleasure, but were thinking strategically and in a long-range way. They were looking for stabilisation, preferably in the form of a young gentleman who could give them a chance for a better life, cheaper accommodation, a lift to work and some money for maintaining their external beauty. A better model might come around. The magical aura of Friday night beautifully encompassed also Russian *nuevo-riches* males, hot Spanish men or bawdy Turks and Greeks. Everybody, but Poles. Those guys, exhausted by the whole working week, very economical about spending the pounds they earned, frequently not very attractive physically and intellectually, insecure, facing the language barrier and completely unadjusted, forgotten by history, media, and God, with no friends, despised even by Polish girls, were drinking vodka and munching on hot dog sausages.<sup>25</sup>

Prose texts written by men – with the exception of *S@motność w sieci* by Janusz Leon Wiśniewski<sup>26</sup> – present a picture of socially marginalised and degenerated losers, who not only cannot achieve professional success, but also fail in relationships with women. Those failures become the experience of the protagonists of *Przebiegum życia* by Czerwiński: forty-year-old Gustaw and Konrad, a dozen or so years his junior – two men from Warsaw, staying in Ireland and looking for a new beginning abroad. Gustaw, an economist, leaves Poland having lost everything: a well-paid job in a corporation and his family as well (his wife leaves him, taking their two daughters with her). Konrad, on the other hand, is a college graduate, who cannot find employment in Poland. Dublin becomes the place where their illusions, hopes, and ambitions are revised. Working as garbage men, they live from hand to mouth. In Suskiewicz's novella, the protagonist's lot seems to follow a similar pattern – after a series of professional and emotional failures, he returns to Poland, although he knows that no better life is awaiting him there. The process of degradation and social marginalisation can also be observed among the protagonists of Miklasz's *Polska szkoła boksu*, who decide to leave Poland to earn money for weddings which even-

<sup>24</sup> See: K. von Heuckelom, "Od 'Polish Remover' do 'Polskiej szkoły boksu'. Polskość w najnowszej literaturze migracyjnej," in: *Polonistyka w Europie. Kierunki i perspektywy rozwoju*, edited by G. Filip, J. Pasterska, M. Patro-Kucab, Rzeszów: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> A. Miklasz, op. cit., p. 87.

<sup>26</sup> The main protagonist of Wiśniewski's novel, Jakub, is a geneticist of international reputation, residing permanently in Germany. One day he receives through ICQ a message from an unknown woman, who would like to share her problems with him. That message becomes the beginning of a fascination and an affair, which will take place mostly on the Internet.

tually do not take place, because the Penelopes awaiting their Odysseuses do not possess the virtue of faithfulness.

Women seem to function in the new situation much better. In female stories, the ironic, lamenting tone, which dominates male narratives, is replaced by «chick-lit» literature, which presents emigration as part of the process of climbing up, not getting down, the social ladder. The stories about a degraded Odysseus are replaced by a contemporary variation of the Cinderella story.<sup>27</sup> Women perceive going abroad as an opportunity for their further development (both professional and personal). Hence, the female protagonists live in the metropolis, work in marketing or advertising companies and search for the right man.

This is an indication that women turn out to be more flexible. Hence, "in migration narratives Polishness understood in a man-centred manner is replaced by a diffusive identity (both in the national and gender aspects), while male narratives are rich in – sometimes ironic – lament over the fall of the patriarchal paradigm."<sup>28</sup> Both male and female narratives form together a relatively homogeneous image of Polish migration of the "EU era." Piotr Czerwiński, as well as many other writers, has been trying to convince us that "may be except China, the whole world is Iro-Polo." Poland as a country will soon turn into a virtual one. We will all clear off, and the last one out, please turn off the lights."<sup>29</sup>

We can only hope that his vision will not be a prophetic one.

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<sup>27</sup> K. von Heuckelom, op. cit., p. 326.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 328.

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