

(Trans)national Journeys.

A Case Study Using the Example of Selected Prose Works by Andrzej Stasiuk

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Travel writing is one of many literary genres. In it we further find the subgenres of the travel essay and the travel novel: thus it includes both the genre of literary fiction and that of journalistic nonfiction, not to mention biography and autobiography. Travel constitutes not only the theme of a given work but also its poetics – words, phrases, styles, characters, worlds, and so on. It is difficult to find a contemporary work, literary or non-literary, that does not at least obliquely reference the poetics of travel or the journey.¹ In Roman Zimand's ironic words: "A journey? There's nothing easier than a journey."²

This state of affairs – the accumulated fascination with travel, both in literature and in other areas of life – results from the fact that mobility nowadays is something more than engaging in the activity of moving from place to place. Mobility has various faces: as a way of organizing society, as an incessant flow of information in the globalized conditions we live under, as the basis of culture's functionality. If the shadow of a global catastrophe were to sweep over all human existence, it would undoubtedly involve this multi-layered movement coming to a sudden standstill. The earth cannot stop moving – for it to do so would, in all likelihood, amount to the end of civilization as we know it. "To travel means to live,"³ Andrzej Stasiuk has rightly declared, and we would do well to take those words seriously.

¹ On this subject, see: J. Sławiński, "Podróż" (The Journey) in M. Głowiński, T. Kostkiewiczowa, A. Okopień-Sławińska, J. Sławiński, *Słownik terminów literackich* (A Dictionary of Literary Terms), ed. Janusza Sławińskiego, Wrocław 1988, pp. 363–364. Dorota Kozicka has written on the genre of travel more generally in the context of Polish twentieth century literature. See D. Kozicka, "Dwudziestowieczne 'podróże intelektualne'. (Między esejem a autobiografią)" (Twentieth Century "Intellectual Journeys." [Between Essay and Autobiography]), *Teksty Drugie* (Second Texts) 2003, 2–3, pp. 41–59.

² R. Zimand, "Gatunek: podróż" (Genre: Travel), *Znak* (Sign) 1989, 10–12, p. 45. The text was first published in *Kultura* (Culture) in nos. 10–11, 1983.

³ A. Stasiuk, *Fado*, Wołowiec 2006, p. 39.

Mobility represents the *Zeitgeist* of the early twenty-first century. In Jahan Ramazani's book *A Transnational Poetics* (2009) we discover the following idea: literature, like the Earth itself, never stays in one place. Ramazani writes mainly about poetry and deals above all with the literary tradition of the English-speaking world, by its very nature open, international, and cosmopolitan. Therein lies the originality of Ramazani's book and conception, proclaiming a poetics that functions beyond national traditions. Literature thus "travels," and the directions of its peculiar displacements can be traced at various levels, in diverse contexts, in the work of particular authors who, writing in English, have invoked the theme of travel. Understood thus, literature knows no borders – chiefly thanks to the English language's role in breaking down cultural barriers in the age of globalization.⁴ We must, however, remember, as Leela Gandhi points out in her book *Postcolonial Theory*, that travel features prominently in the culture of colonialism: "Indeed, [...] the experience—and accompanying narrative—of travel" were essential to the shaping of imperial identity.⁵ Edward W. Said, one of the unquestioned founders of Post-Colonial Studies, stated in *Orientalism* that: "Every European traveler or resident in the Orient has had to protect himself from its unsettling influences."⁶ Power, then, is wielded by the traveler, and whoever has power is free to travel when and where he pleases.

To return to Ramazani's book, it is noteworthy that in the third chapter, entitled *Travelling Poetry*, the author presents several ways in which literature travels: firstly, authors travel; secondly, and rather obviously, literary works often record impressions from a journey, and thirdly, literature, thanks to the non-literal nature of language, has the power to cross many borders (cultural, national, and social). As Ramazani writes:

A figuratively rich discourse, poetry enables travel in part by its characteristically high proportion of figures of thought, as well as figures of speech. Since *metaphor* derives from the Greek "transfer" or "carry across," it should come as little surprise that poetry's figurative language enacts geographic and other kinds of movement.⁷

The American scholar's diagnosis is astonishing in its simplicity: poetry is, in a certain sense, identical with movement. The language of poetry, like travel, relates to space; it allows free displacement at the level of imagination, association, and meaning. That is why poetry (literature) easily overcomes borders, and its language penetrates a wide variety of cultures and traditions. The same could be roughly said about any and every genre of writing – in that sense, Ramazani's analyses are perhaps less than revelatory, but they prompt us toward communicative resistance to national, ethnic and cultural barriers. At the same time we should

⁴ Among others, Andrzej Szachaj has written on multiculturalism in the age of globalization in his book *E pluribus unum? In the chapter "Multikulturalizm jako reakcja na globalizację i odróżnorodnienie" (Multiculturalism As a Reaction to Globalization and Differentiation)*, Szachaj considers the reasons behind multiculturalism and the directions in which it has developed – taking as his main example the American tradition. In this perspective, multiculturalism is a result of the mass society, a reaction to globalization, an expression of the desire for self-differentiation in the homogenized culture of global capitalism. See A. Szachaj, *E pluribus unum? Dylematy wielokulturowości i politycznej poprawności (E pluribus unum? Dilemmas of Multiculturalism and Political Correctness)*, Kraków 2010, pp. 131-134.

⁵ L. Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory. A Critical Introduction*, New York 1998, p. 133.

⁶ E.W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York 2014, p. 166.

⁷ J. Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics*, Chicago 2009, pp. 56-57.

be wary of getting caught in the neoliberal trap that Homi K. Bhabha warned against in his preface to the Routledge Classics edition of *The Location of Culture*: “There is a kind of global cosmopolitanism, widely influential now, that configures the planet as a concentric world of national societies extending to global villages. It is a cosmopolitanism of relative prosperity and privilege founded on ideas of progress that are complicit with neo-liberal forms of governance, and free-market forces of competition.”⁸

Nonetheless, theorists of mobility – including British sociologist John Urry, author of *Sociology Beyond Societies* (2000), *The Tourist Gaze* (2002), *Mobilities* (2007), and *Mobile Lives* (2010) – assert that traces of mobility mark everything relating to human activity, and not so much in the metaphorical sense of “life as a journey” (familiar going at least as far back as Homer’s *Odyssey*), as in the literal sense of an existence governed in practical terms by movement, for all of its many-colored variety. We ourselves move in bodily ways (walking, driving, riding, flying), but so, too, do many other things: information, images, ideas, objects, works of art, money, garbage... The list could be extended into infinity, ascribing mobility to everything that we find in the panoramic landscape of human experience. “Cultures are themselves mobile as a result of the mobilities that sustain diverse patterns of sociality,” Urry claims. The sociologist’s vision, captured above all in *Sociology Beyond Societies* (2014), is attractive – everyone (and everything) travels, Urry seems to be saying, but we do not always manage to be aware of the social consequences of this phenomenon, among which one of the most important is the disappearance of uniform social structures.⁹

This does not mean, of course, that people did not travel (and write about their travels) in the past, but they never did so with such frequency and in so many different ways as in our time of *all-inclusive* package bookings and Facebook (options, we should remember, that are nevertheless not available to all). It is important to underscore that travel does not always mean unlimited freedom. Hanna Gosk considers this question in her introduction to the book *Narracje migracyjne w literaturze polskiej XX i XXI wieku* (Migration Narratives in Polish Literature of the 20th and 21st Centuries):

Migration represents one of the most important existential experiences of the human being in the 20th and 21st centuries. Since it has often been imposed by political or economic circumstances, not desired but thrust upon people, stories on the subject have taken on the grim coloration of a reported trauma with all of the consequences that implies: gaps and things left unsaid in matters difficult to express, lacking models of storytelling technique. Migration is a challenge and a factor in the creation of identity. It can “open up” the subject to new experiences, inspire him or her to creative activity, or “shut up” the subject in imaginary space and the past tense (“there, then”), making contact with the new environment impossible, or keeping him/her in a state of suspension and indefiniteness (“in between”).¹⁰

⁸ H.K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, New York 1994, p. xiv.

⁹ J. Urry, *Sociology Beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Twenty-First Century*, New York 2012. Quoted passage from first page of Chapter 3, “Travellings,” 49, and the entire chapter is relevant: pp. 49-77.

¹⁰ H. Gosk, “Wprowadzenie” (Introduction), in H. Gosk (ed.), *Narracje migracyjne w literaturze polskiej XX i XXI wieku* (Migration Narratives in Polish Literature of the 20th and 21st Centuries), Kraków 2012, p. 7.

Is this equally true today? In Poland? In the city or in the countryside, in the space where we live? On the one hand, since 1990 Poles have been increasingly free to travel – in every sense of the word, in terms of communication as well (interpersonal, cultural, literary). On the other hand, the widely shared early 21st century experience of emigration is also common to the generation born around the 1980s – those who entered adulthood at the moment of Poland's accession to the European Union and the opening of Western employment markets are a generation of emigrants. And they do not always migrate freely. “Modern Western culture is in large part the work of exiles, émigrés, refugees,”¹¹ as the earlier-mentioned Edward Said wrote.

Andrzej Stasiuk has a prominent place among contemporary Polish writers – both among those reporting firsthand on, and equally among those analyzing, the mobility of people, things, and culture. In the first decade of the 21st century, Stasiuk's travel book entitled *Jadąc do Babadag* (Traveling to Babadag, 2004) received mostly enthusiastic or at least highly favorable reviews and was honored with perhaps the highest form of recognition possible for a Polish author, the “Nike” Literary Award, for 2005. Stasiuk's book was translated into a dozen or so languages, including into English by Michael Kandel as *On the Road to Babadag: Travels in the Other Europe*, published in 2011, and also the recipient of great critical acclaim throughout the English-speaking literary market (in the US, Canada and Great Britain). The English title chosen by Kandel is interesting, referencing Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and enunciating the aim of the work in its subtitle, the phrase “the Other Europe” promising a new and unknown experience, the revelation of some kind of secret. It further corresponds to Stasiuk's consistent effort to project the story of a close, personal, “familial” version of Europe. Hanna Gosk, mentioned above, wrote of his book *Moja Europa* (My Europe, co-written with Yuri Andrukhovych), juxtaposing it with Czesław Miłosz's *Rodzinna Europa* (Familial/Native Europe, published as *Native Realm*): “The possessive adjective ‘my’ in the title testifies to the desire to treat the topic from an individual, personal perspective.”¹²

It may have been a coincidence, but it is hard to deny the symbolic significance of the fact that the original Polish version of *On the Road to Badabag* was released at the moment when Poland became a member of the European Union. In this connection, it is proper to consider the question of the popularity and “translatability” of this Polish author's works, but in the particular context of the literary lexicon, genre and theme of “travel.” This problem has already elicited the following observation from Emilia Kledzik: “Andrzej Stasiuk's writing is adored by the European reading public for disseminating a different model of tourism than

¹¹E.W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays*, Granta Books, 2013, Essay 17, “Reflections on Exile.” It is worthwhile to compare Said's assertion with a book by historian Jan M. Piskorski titled *Wygnańcy*. See J.M. Piskorski, *Wygnańcy. Przesiedlenia i uchodźcy w dwudziestowiecznej Europie* (Exiles. Displacements and Refugees in Twentieth Century Europe), Warszawa 2010. On page 58 of that work, the author writes, concerning the problem of migration in the early twentieth century, “In conditions of migration movement, belief in organizational-logistical and technical possibilities and also rising social and national tensions in the areas of empires ruling the vast spaces from the Baltic to the Balkans, in the heads of European politicians and planners, the idea was inevitably bound to arise of forced relocations, well-known from colonial practice.”

¹²H. Gosk, *Opowieści skolonizowanego/kolonizatora. W kręgu studiów postzależnościowych nad literaturą polską XX i XXI wieku* (Stories of the Colonized / Colonizer, From Post-Dependence Studies of 20th and 21st Century Polish Literature), Kraków 2010, p. 91. See also the chapter in this book entitled “*Miejsce Kresów/pogranicza w ‘rodzinnej’/‘mojej’ Europie*” (The Place of the Karsts / the Border in “My”/ “Familial” Europe), pp. 83–92.

the one popular at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries – conducted in places diametrically opposite to those seen in the colorful pictures of travel agency brochures.”¹³ We must also not forget that the enthusiasm for telling about his travels is rooted in the writer’s biography. Stasiuk’s experience behind bars, where he served a term for desertion in the 1980s (a fact reflected in his authorial debut, *Mury Hebronu* [The Walls of Hebron]), inspired him to write about his travels, first within his own country, in *Opowieści galicyjskie* (Tales of Galicia, 1995) and *Dukla* (1997), and later about his travels to more distant destinations in Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and Asia.¹⁴

And so we have to ask, is it because what Stasiuk writes in the essays, stories, and feuilletons inspired by his travels, particularly in *On the Road to Babadag*, but also in *Fado* (2006), *Dojczland* (Doytchland, 2007), *Dziennik pisany później* (A Diary Written Later, 2010), *Nie ma ekspresów przy żółtych drogach* (No Express Lanes on the Yellow Roads, 2013) and *Wschód* (East, 2014) – is so original, that he often finds foreign publishers interested in his work? Or is it rather because the texts are so universal that they can be fairly easily presented to a readers not necessarily familiar with Central European literature and culture? Or is it, for lack of a better phrase, “transnational travel literature”?

From the beginning of his career as an author, Stasiuk has struggled with reality (the lived and experienced one as well as the literary, remembered and recorded one). Above all, as a traveler and writer, he possesses an awareness of his own failure to pay due attention to reality – coming across as if he never had quite enough time to carefully inspect observe and describe everything. For that reason, he abandons inquiries into the present and future and immerses himself in what has gone before. He rejects considerations of the future, which represents a kind of unwanted horizon:

What is memory, anyway, if not the endless exchange of currency, a continual allotting and distributing, a counting in the hope that the total will be right, that what once was will return with no shortage, whole, untouched, and perhaps even with interest, through love and longing? What is travel, anyway, if not spending, then reckoning what’s left and turning your pockets inside out? The Gypsies, the money, the passport stamps, the tickets, the stone from the bank of the Mát, the cow’s horn smoothed by the Danube current in the Delta, *blok na pokutu*, the fine in Slovakia, *račun parkiranja* – the parking ticket in Piran, *nota de plata*, the bill at the pub in Sulina: two fried catfish, two salads, a carafe of wine, one Silva beer – in all 85,700 ...¹⁵

In *On the Road to Babadag*, from which the above passage was taken, the protagonist rushes constantly forward; he keeps “searching his pockets” and counting out places, faces, names,

¹³E. Kledzik, “Pochwała imagologii. Rozważania o obrazie Romów w literaturze polskiej XX wieku” (In Praise of the Study of Images. Reflections on the Image of the Roma in 20th Century Polish Literature), in H. Gosk, D. Kołodziejczyk (ed.), *Historie, społeczeństwa, przestrzenie dialogu. Studia postzależnościową w perspektywie porównawczej* (Histories, Societies, Dialogical Space. Post-Dependence Studies in a Comparative Perspective), Kraków 2014, p. 487.

¹⁴See J. Madejski, *Deformacje biografii* (Deformations of Biography), Szczecin 2004, particularly the chapter entitled “Autobiografia i więzienie” (Autobiography and Prison).

¹⁵A. Stasiuk, *On the Road to Babadag: Travels in the Other Europe*, trans. M. Kandel, Houghton Mifflin, 2011, p. 185.

objects, and landscapes. This point of view makes sense, because people tell about their travels in the past tense, as something finished, closed, lived through. Stasiuk complicates the perspective when he asserts that he has to continually invent his travels anew – his reconstruction of them is simultaneously a construction. The description of what he observed thus seems precise, but is it not at the same time, (re)contextualized constantly, a literary hybrid, in terms of Ramazani's reflections poetically hyper-organized? For example, in this passage:

Three months later I was riding, at dusk, through the village Rozpucie at the foot of Słonne Góry, Brine Mountains. The cows were returning from the meadows and taking up the full width of the road. I had to brake, then come to a complete stop. They parted before the car like a lazy reddish wave. In the frosty air, steam puffed from their nostrils. Warm, swollen, indifferent, the animals stared straight ahead, into the distance, because neither objects nor landscape held meaning for them. They simply looked through everything. In Rozpucie too I felt the enormity and continuity of the world around me. At that same hour, in that same dying light, cattle were coming home: from Kiev, say, to Split, from my Rozpucie to Skopje, and the same in Stara Zagora.¹⁶

Driving in his car, the man sees these cows in the road, who, after the moment in which he must slow down, awaken inside him metaphysical inquiries about the meaning of existence. Stasiuk often escapes into the “poetic” layer of narration – here he looks from behind the steering wheel, and thus quite differently than one gazes, for example, through the window of a bus or a tram. Perhaps he has less time for looking around and for that reason resorts to stylistic devices that allow him to establish the mood of traveling through mountainous areas? Such “poetic” gambits are typical for Stasiuk. By poetic, I mean that in Stasiuk's writing, the places, events, and people he describes tend to come more densely packed with meaning than in reality – they become “poeticized,” beautified, augmented. It is therefore possible to come away with the impression that the protagonist observing all of these landscapes is in fact creating them, and all the points that he ticks off on the map are, to a greater or lesser degree, of his own design. This is also what transnationality is all about – the ability to present one's own point of view as universal.

We see a similar phenomenon at work in Stasiuk's collection of travel prose entitled *Fado*, where the narrator, once again, observes the world through the windshield of his car:

Four hours later I gave up. I did not feel like reading the map. I turned at the first exit and descended by the narrow serpentine to the bottom of the wooded valley. At the top ran a six-lane highway on gigantic concrete spans. The rays of headlights glimmered in the sky. The monotonous rumble of cars fell through the valley like heavy dust. A few minutes later everything had disappeared and gone silent. I was driving through the forest. Sometimes I passed buildings. They were dark. Everyone was asleep. I had no idea where I was.¹⁷

This passage is taken from Stasiuk's micro-essay “Highway.” Such views observed through the window may seem exotic, but it is also not difficult to imagine these or similar scenes

¹⁶A. Stasiuk, *On the Road to Babadag*, p. 27.

¹⁷A. Stasiuk, *Fado*, Wołowiec 2008, p. 7. My translation—T. D. W.

as a subject of conversation among people of diverse nationalities. The experience of travel has a universal quality and can bring about cultural barrier crossings. Crossings, but not the elimination of barriers – Stasiuk is not looking for homogenization, something he views with distaste. As Dorota Siwor has noted, the author of *On the Road to Babadag* “exhibits his esteem for the Roma, for Albanians, all the pariahs of civilized and well-ordered Europe.”¹⁸

Traveling is also the guiding theme of *Dojczland*, an essay that tells of the fate of a literary *gastarbeiter* (guest worker) who wanders all over Germany. The main character stays a day or two in German towns, walks around, and observes. Besides the images, familiar from the previous books, of the vibrant metropolis, Stasiuk here describes his experiences traveling by train. A train journey provides good opportunities for looking at one’s fellow passengers:

The train [to Tübingen] was one of those commuter trains, crowded. The passengers were all young people. I was the oldest. Then a guy in a leather jacket got on. Under his arm he carried a registration card. He took out his phone and began speaking in Serbian, or possibly in Croatian, in any case some local language. He stretched his legs out in front of him and talked and talked and talked. I tried to look at the landscape, but the Serb, or maybe Croat, was distracting me. He chattered away as if he were at home, as if time did not exist, as if he were sitting in the shade somewhere, he drank, smoked, played the political pundit, philosophized about the nature of the world and the development of motor transport. Outside the window it was a November day in Bavaria, but I could feel summer in the Balkans.¹⁹

In the quotidian German reality the author-narrator perceives what he is familiar with from the Balkans – its particular, peculiar “je ne sais quoi” draws his attention, issues reminders of itself at every step, and entices. A Serb or Croat can be recognized only in close contact, such as for example on the train, in the compartment, when you can get closer to him, listen to his language, observe his typical behavior. There is a curious “tonal” shift here from the situation in the train to an imagined picture of the Balkans. For a moment the narrator describing this situation is on his way to Stuttgart, the next moment he is again traveling back to Babadag. Returning for a moment to Ramazani’s book, we can state that this is another important feature of the transnationality of literature: in one sentence, in one short fragment, within the space of a phrase, it enables two opposing worlds to be shown and two cultures to collide.

In another story of travel, based on his own experiences, Stasiuk returned to the Balkans. *A Diary Written Later* opens with a short description of a trip by ferry to Vlorë in Albania:

I’m here again. I took the ferry over from Brindisi. There was no window in my cabin. I took my roll mat and sleeping bag and went out onto the bow. The deck was vibrating and stank of oil. The sky was full of stars. I went to sleep immediately. I woke at dawn. The shore was visible. Men were standing on the side of the ship looking off into the misty hills. They stood separately, not speaking

¹⁸D. Siwor, “Między obcym a innym – kilka portretów z tożsamością w tle (Nowak, Kornhauser, Stasiuk)” (Between the Foreigner and the Other— a Few Portraits Against the Background of Identity (Nowak, Kornhauser, Stasiuk), in P. Bukowiec, D. Siwor (ed.), *Etniczność, tożsamość, literatura. Zbiór studiów* (Ethnicity, Identity, Literature. Collected Studies), Kraków 2010, p. 151.

¹⁹A. Stasiuk, *Dojczland*, Wołowiec 2007, pp. 8–9. My translation—T. D. W.

to each other. Their faces were serious. They had sailed to the fatherland, but I could see no trace of excitement or joy there. Through the mist and through the golden light of the morning they saw the boundless sorrow of their country.²⁰

Of one thing we can be certain: this is not a postmodern tourist's excursion to a sunny shore; the narrator of *A Diary Written Later* is not a typical foreigner in a Hawaiian shirt, complaining about the broken air conditioner, warm beer and cold water in the pool. This trip by ferry is not a sight-seeing attraction; it needs to be experienced, lived through, described, but the description, as we seem is fragmented and vague – the trip took place at night, there was not much to see, and short sentences written in a style recalling Miron Białoszewski's "anti-literature" convey the jumbled nature of the facts he remembers. Later we find another passage about the ferry ride:

We got there [to Bajram Curri] by water. The ferry sailed via a long, narrow lake through the mountains and sometimes touched land. One or two people came out and moved along an unseen path toward a pass or ridge etched out somewhere under the open sky. In some places someone was waiting for somebody with a donkey. The name of the lake was Komani. It was artificial and reminiscent of a fjord. It stretched a few dozen kilometers wide. The Drin River was closed up with a dam, to generate electricity. To get to the station in Koman we took a black tunnel hollowed out in a rock. The tunnel looked like a natural cave. A delivery van would barely fit inside.²¹

The world seen from the deck of the ferry looks different than through the car windshield or the train window – particularly when there is nothing to look at because you are surrounded by only water. The narration becomes sluggish, as if unfinished (endless?), drifting along slowly. When reading Stasiuk's prose, one may also reach the conclusion that the journey, through Poland, the Balkans, Eastern and Western Europe, never ends, continuing like a traveler's restless dream in a foreign land.

Maciej Duda, interpreting the dialogical book Stasiuk co-wrote with Yuri Andrukhovych, whose full title is *Moja Europa. Dwa eseje o Europie zwanej środkową* (My Europe. Two Essays on the Europe Called Central, 2000), declared that "Stasiuk, describing the circumference of his Europe in a circle on the map, notes with relief that it includes neither Russia nor Germany."²² Nonetheless, Stasiuk has also visited those two countries, between which Poland abides as if caught in their tight grip. In his books written in the second decade of the 21st century, Stasiuk presents different regions and quite distinct landscapes from those in his previous work. In the collection of feuilletons entitled *Nie ma ekspresów przy żółtych drogach* (No Express Lanes on the Yellow Roads) he leads the reader along winding roads still farther away than before: to China (including a riveting text about the figure of Chairman Mao), to Mongolia, and, in *Wschód* (East), he gives an autobiographical account of setting out into a land he had hitherto rarely visited:

²⁰A. Stasiuk, *Dziennik pisany później*, Wołowiec 2010, p. 9. My translation—T. D. W.

²¹A. Stasiuk, *Dziennik pisany później*, p. 12. My translation—T. D. W.

²²M. Duda, *Polskie Bałkany. Proza postjugosłowiańska w kontekście feministycznym, genderowym i postkolonialnym. Recepcja polska* (The Polish Balkans. Post-Yugoslavian Prose in Feminist, Gender and Post-Colonial Contexts. Polish Reception), Kraków 2013, p. 35.

In 2006 I went to Russia for the first time, because I wanted to see the country in whose shadow my childhood and youth had been spent. I also wanted to see the spiritual homeland of my state-owned farm. I disembarked at the airport in Irkutsk after traveling for thirteen hours. The flight from Moscow was supposed to last five hours, but for unknown reasons we landed in Bratsk instead of Irkutsk and were told to exit the plane. A gray rain fell on gray concrete.²³

It must be said, however, that many things change in this world, but Stasiuk's journeys, aside from the diverse points on the compass, are basically similar to each other. Ziemowit Szczerek was right when he wrote these words about the author of *East*: "Andrzej Stasiuk is like a record that I'm fond of: I grab one of his books, open up to any page and read a few pages just the way I would listen to a few tracks chosen at random."²⁴ Even in Russia the writer again finds similar places, similar people, and practically the same landscapes. In an interview in *Nowa Europa Wschodnia* (New Eastern Europe), he said: "Russia is most interesting where its European-ness vanishes, where it borders with Asia. I find it really interesting, how this world is coming apart."²⁵

Probably the most stirring moment in *East* is the narrator's meeting with his mother in her home. The rather restless and melancholy son, who would like to be on the move again, is unable to explain to the old woman where his need for constant travel comes from. "What agony, she says in the morning. She rasps and groans, as she opens the door and lets in the morning light. What agony? I ask. That you have to travel like that, she answers."²⁶ Can this compulsion to travel be a burden? Zygmunt Bauman perceived a tension between freedom and captivity in the figure of the postmodern tourist: "The tourists pay for their freedom; the right to disregard native concerns and feelings, the right to spin their own web of meanings, they obtain in a commercial transaction."²⁷ Stasiuk, however, is a completely different type of traveler, closer to the tradition of the American beatniks, like Jack Kerouac, than to the late capitalist consumer.

The essence of the newest travel writing is hard to pin down, and the example of Stasiuk's work demonstrates its elusive nature: it is found at the edges of country landscapes, in the centers of great cities, in the wilderness, under the mountains of garbage in the dumping grounds of Western civilization, in virtual reality, in trips to neighboring lands and faraway excursions. In movement and in stillness. In auto/bio/geo/graphies, to use the term concocted by Elżbieta Rybicka.²⁸

²³A. Stasiuk, *Wschód* (East), Wołowiec 2014, pp. 20–21.

²⁴Z. Szczerek, "Niechciana Polska" (The Unwanted Poland), *Nowa Europa Wschodnia* (New Eastern Europe) 2014, 6, p. 164.

²⁵"Na Wschodzie bez zmian. Z Andrzejem Stasiukiem rozmawia Grzegorz Nurek" (All Quiet on the Eastern Front. Grzegorz Nurek Talks with Andrzej Stasiuk), *Nowa Europa Wschodnia* (New Eastern Europe), 2015, 1, p. 13.

²⁶A. Stasiuk, *Wschód*, p. 44.

²⁷Z. Bauman, "Vagabond and tourist: postmodern types," in Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, Malden 1993, Chapter 8, "An Overview: In the End is the Beginning," pp. 223–251.

²⁸E. Rybicka, *Geopoetyka. Przestrzeń i miejsce we współczesnych teoriach i praktykach literackich* (Geopoetics. Space and Place in Contemporary Theories and Literary Practices) Kraków 2014, p. 282.

When Dorota Wodecka, a journalist for *Gazeta Wyborcza*, asked Stasiuk about the purpose and meaning of his travels, the writer replied: “Each time is different.”²⁹ Reading his texts may be useful from the perspective of building a transnational poetics – if a collection or canon of international travel writing were to be assembled, Andrzej Stasiuk would undoubtedly represent Poland therein. He writes in *Fado*, after all – as if recalling the words of Zimand – “Because getting there is the least of it. The most important part begins after that, precisely now, when everything is motionless, paralyzed, and slowly turning into nothingness.”

²⁹*Życie to jednak strata jest. Andrzej Stasiuk w rozmowach z Dorotą Wodecką* (Life Is A Losing Game. Andrzej Stasiuk In Conversation with Dorota Wodecka), Warszawa 2015, p. 176.

KEYWORDS

Polish literature after 1989

transnationality

ABSTRACT:

The purpose of this article is to present travel themes in the work of Andrzej Stasiuk with reference to the theory of Jahan Ramazani, an American literary scholar at the University of Virginia, author of the book *A Transnational Poetics* (2009). Ramazani's theory can be summarized thusly: traveling is the essence of literature, and certain works (mainly of poetry) contain features similar to a journey: they are dynamic, variable, and cross borders. From this perspective Andrzej Stasiuk, author of travel prose, can also be presented as a (trans)national writer, specific and simultaneously universal. If one had to establish a (trans)national literary canon, Stasiuk could represent the area of Polish culture.

Central Europe

travel

prose

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