

# **Imagination of Space and Places in Polish Travel Writing after 1989: The Case of Natasza Goerke's "Before the Storm"**

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## **Introduction**

This paper intends to show that the depiction of space and places in Natasza Goerke's short story "Before the Storm" (*Przed burzą*) consists of various fictional and intertextual elements and, consequently, that it makes ironic reference to reality. Her surrealistic, grotesque stories have led to various, new points of view in discussions of postmodern Polish literature or postmodernism in general. Many of these viewpoints are devoted to the features of her writing that provoke consideration of the stranger's experience of intercultural space.<sup>1</sup> However, critics have almost overlooked the fact that Goerke's imagination creates space and places in a unique manner, different from Olga Tokarczuk, who creates poetic and mystic spaces for inventing the self. The genre name of "travel writing" does not encompass all of her writings, but it would help us to reread her literature against the background of globalization.

### ***1) Women Writers as Tourists in Time/Space***

Goerke was born in 1962 in Poland and migrated to West Germany in the mid-1980s. After intensively traveling in the East, she took up res-

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<sup>1</sup> Features such as trans- or hybrid identity, diverse perspectives, irony, distance from cultural patterns, and parody of stereotypes have been mentioned in this context.

idence in Hamburg, Germany. Currently, she spends half of each year in Hamburg, spends every other year in Nepal, and constantly visits Poland and other countries.

Goerke is a representative figure of the young generation of writers that emerged in the post-communist era of Polish literature. The members of this generation, born in the 1960s, share certain historical experiences, and an intellectual as well as an aesthetic tradition. What is remarkable is that a good many of its members are highly educated women who have spent much time abroad, such as in Germany (Goerke), the USA (Izabela Filipiak), and France (Manuela Gretkowska).<sup>2</sup> Their nomadic ways of life, caused not by necessity but curiosity, have given them new points of view and experiences, which essentially differ from the “up-rooted” experiences of classic exile writers.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, this makes a striking contrast to male writers of the same generation, because in their writings a sense of alienation abroad still plays a central role.<sup>4</sup> The autobiographical protagonists of these female writers have no permanent residence and audaciously cross borders. In their ironical eyes, familiar as well as foreign places equally become a world in miniature.

In the latter half of the 1990s, literary critics noticed that this trait characterizes not only women writers living abroad, but also those living in Poland, such as Tokarczuk and Magdalena Tulli. Their literary works dealt with a kind of time travel to the past, a mythic past as well as their own childhoods.<sup>5</sup> Thus, “travel writing” acquired a broader sense, especially when it referred to the writings of this generation, because, their authors grew up in the communist era with highly manipulated representation of the legacy of the Second World War.<sup>6</sup> After 1989, they

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2 Currently, Gretkowska and Filipiak live in Poland.

3 Jerzy Jarzębski, *Pożegnanie z emigracją* [The Farewell to Emigration] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1998).

4 Bożena Karwowska, *Druga Płeci na wygnaniu* [Second Sex in Exile] (Kraków: Universitas, 2013), pp. 77–78.

5 Inga Iwasiów, “Siostry—szkic o prozie (młodej) kobiet,” in *Teksty drugie*, 5/1996, pp. 96–97.

6 Fiederike Eigler, *Heimat, Space, Narrative: Toward a Transnational Approach to Flight and Expulsion* (New York: Camden House, 2014), p. 152.

wanted to be free from these negative bonds and connect themselves with the world. The term coined by Tokarczuk, a “generation without history,” illustrates that after having denied the historical view forced upon them by the communist regime, this generation has no historical ties with which to connect themselves with the former generations, and to define their collective identity. It is no wonder their literature reflects a “feeling of strangeness in the world” and the idea of “myth as replacement of history.”<sup>7</sup>

## **2) Proposal for a New Approach in the Context of Globalization**

After a decade of research on the 1960s generation, conducted in the early 2000s, reading and writing as intertextual acts seem to command much attention in the study of literature. In the age of globalization, transcultural phenomena are everywhere; it is impossible to discuss them as the concerns of a particular generation.

The German literary scholar, Ottmar Ette, remarks that a major portion of 21st-century literature will be *literatures without a fixed abode*, which calls for new approaches to reading and interpretation, and has coined the phrase “literature on the move.”<sup>8</sup> According to him, there are a number of examples of its influences on literary works, while most literary studies have not sufficiently considered its consequences for literature.<sup>9</sup>

He devotes a great part of his book *Literature on the Move* (2001) to the discussion of travel literature, because, according to him, travel literature is a point of departure for “literature on the move.” As mentioned above, literary works by female Polish writers in the first half of the 1990s form a discourse developed during a particular historical background. One might say that now is the time to reread them creatively, as precursors, for example, to “literature on the move.”

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7 Małgorzata Trebisz, “Aus der Fremde in die Heimat [Return Home from Abroad],” in Chirsta Ebert and Małgorzata Trebisz, Hrsg., *Feminismus in Osteuropa?* [Feminism in East Europe?] (Berlin: Scriptorvaz, 2003), p. 111.

8 Ottmar Ette, *Literatur in Bewegung* (Weilerswift: Velbrück, 2001). idem, *Literature on the Move*, trans. Katharina Vester, (Amsterdam/New York: Editions Rodopi, 2003).

9 Ottmar Ette, a.a.O., p. 11.

In the case of Goerke, her quantity of “travel writing” is considerably small, but it is obvious that she takes an ironic distance from cultural patterns and prefers cultural diversity. The Polish literary scholar, Alina Molisak notices, in her recent study, that Goerke describes not only places that one leaves and feels connected with, or that become familiar little by little, but also that she creates a new space, a kind of buffer zone unable to be appropriated by anything. As an instance of this tendency, Molisak cites the work “Before the Storm.”<sup>10</sup> I think that this work also proves Goerke’s sensibility of changed spatiality and imagination of space and places.

## **Imagination of Space and Places: Natasza Goerke’s “Before the Storm”**

### ***1) Mnumbwa as a Complex of Three Components***

“Before the Storm” concerns the story of a woman who attempts to go on a journey, but in the end abandons this hope. To escape a difficult relationship with her lover, Marian, the protagonist, Madame Pompadour, announces she will part from him for a while by traveling, to a far off country called “Mnumbwa,” but she subsequently stays at home and repaints the hallway of their home.

The story depicts four locales, the “room of Madame Pompadour,” “Mnumbwa,” the “hallway,” and an “airport,” but they are described indeterminately and lose their usual denotations as home, urban space, or destinations on a map. Rather than physical spaces with inherent features, they are objects into which the protagonist transforms excessive desire, dislike, or personal attachment.

Wolfgang Schlott, a German literary scholar of Polish literature, points out that Mnumbwa recalls Patrice Émery Lumumba, the independence leader and first democratically elected Prime Minister of the Re-

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10 Alina Molisak, “Ironie, Grotteske und Surrealismus oder Univasalsprachen. Das Beispiel Natasza Goerke [Irony, the Grotesque and Surrealism or Universal Languages. The Case of Natasza Goerke],” in Daniel Henseler und Renata Makarska, Hrsg., *Polnische Literature in Bewegung. Die Exilwelle der 1980er Jahre [Polish Literature on the Move. The Wave of Exiles of the 1980s]* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2013), p. 118.

public of the Congo, and suggests that Madame Pompadour plans to fly there to be with him.<sup>11</sup> From this remark, we can see how Goerke places a serious political problem side by side with a naïve and individual feelings, without any causal context. One may interpret this as an act of breaking with custom.

However, a close look at one scene reveals a hidden poetry. Finding Mnumbwa on a map, Madame Pompadour is impressed with its poetic sound so much she shouts:

Duchies, kingdoms, republics—what names, what a poem! (...) People, who name their countries with such a name, must really be a people of poets...<sup>12</sup>

In the ensuing argument with Marian, who ridicules Madame Pompadour's apparently naïve idealism and romanticism, Mnumbwa loses its meaning as a destination imbued with either poetic or political significance. Their dialogue develops as follows:

Of course, said Marian. As you feel so connected to the sound itself, you surely set out for Mnumbwa. (...) Even if it is a reaction against my banal daily life, going to Mnumbwa to help with the struggle for the human rights of the oppressed there would be better than committing suicide in München or Stuttgart.<sup>13</sup>

Are you sure there are the oppressed in Mnumbwa?, Marian asked. The oppressed are everywhere, Madame Pompadour called out in a warlike tone (...)<sup>14</sup>

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11 Wolfgang Schlott, *Polnische Prosa nach 1990. Nostalgische Rückblicke und Suche nach neuen Identifikationen* [*Polish Prose after 1990. Nostalgic Retrospectives and the Search for New Identifications*] (Münster: LIT, 2004), p. 73.

12 Goerke, a.a.O., pp. 14–15. “Księstwa, królestwa, republiki—a cóż za nazwy, cóż za poezja! (...) Ludzie, którzy swojemu krajowi takie nadali imię, muszą być doprawdy narodem poetów...”

13 Goerke, a.a.O., p. 15. “Jasne, powiedział, jeśli czujesz związek z samym już brzmieniem, niechybnie powinnaś udać się do Mnumbwy. (...) Nie w Monachium, nie w Stuttgarcie na lata rozkładać się samobójstwo, ale odbić się od banału, wyjechać do Mnumbwy i godnie polec w obronie praw miejscowych ciemiężonych.”

14 Goerke, a.a.O., p. 15. “Jesteś pewna, że w Mnumbwie są ciemiężeni, spytał Marian. Ciemiężeni są wszędzie, zawołała bojowo madame Pompadour...”

By arguing that the oppressed are everywhere, Madame Pompadour deprives “Mnumbwa” of the political significance she gave it just a moment earlier. In short, Goerke depicts Mnumbwa as a space that has three different qualities: it meets the criteria for “anywhere out of home,” is a “place with political connotation,” and has “poetry sound.” These might be paraphrased as an intuitive dimension, a cognitive dimension, and an intertextual dimension.

### **2) *The Hallway and Airport as Indeterminate Places***

In this work, the hallway and airport have no inherent features as physical locations, but they have purely symbolic meanings in terms of their subjective importance to the protagonists. In the beginning of the story, the shabby hallway is a source of conflict. While Marian constantly considers the color of the hallway, Madame Pompadour is indifferent to it. At the end of the story, when it is repainted light blue, a color of trust and peace, it becomes a symbol of the couple’s reconciliation. However, in sharp contrast to its symbolic color, it does not become a place, where Madame Pompadour can live in peace. It remains indeterminate and unstable.

As for the airport, it lacks the transit function that it should have. Moreover, it is doubtful that it exists. The only reference to it is found in Madame Pompadour’s words, “I go directly to the capital. Hopefully there is an airport there.”<sup>15</sup> By saying so, the heroine emphasizes her disorientation and fluidity in a too big world.

### **3) *Home as Nowhere***

Madame Pompadour’s room is drab, almost bare of furnishings, which one can hardly imagine based on the term *home*. Inside, there is only an armchair, a drawer with hats, and a table, on which she has spread out a world map. In this small room, the two protagonists walk around nervously and discuss problems of various sizes, but their points of view never mesh well with each other’s. A dark sky viewed from the

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15 Goerke, a.a.O., p. 15. “Polecę bezpośrednio do stolicy, mam nadzieję, że mają tam lotnisko.”

window and an ominous silence, signaling a coming storm, forms a striking contrast with the image of Mnumbwa, a land of dazzling sunshine.

Given that Mnumbwa is *anywhere* out of home, Madame Pompadour's room is a *nowhere*, a location with no inferences, on the planet. The only factor that distinguishes this home from other places is the presence of Marian as an absolute "other." For him, Madame Pompadour decides to remain at home and begins to measure her own room. This is her attempt to appropriate a room that has been nowhere.

### **Intertextual Dimension with Schulz and Sienkiewicz**

The indeterminacy of space and places connects to the development of the work's intertextual dimension. Madame Pompadour believes that just as the sound of Mnumbwa captured her attention (not the substance), so can she fascinate Marian not with her own "femininity" as a woman, but as a transcendent existence.

I will go, Madame Pompadour declared and spread out a map; I will go, drift away, and, like a sun shine on you without mutuality; You will glorify, honor, admire, cite, and love me, as you cite and love the people who, safely apart from you, do not share the shabby hallway with you. I will rise up to the pinnacle of sainthood, the distance sanctifies my greatness, I, not polluted with the gray every-day reality, will remain in your eyes wonderful forever.<sup>16</sup>

Here, Madame Pompadour longs to be idealized and cited as a text, because the figures in literary texts do "not share any shabby hallway" with Marian, and are neither "polluted with the gray every-day reality." Madame Pompadour thinks that when she becomes a literary figure, she can "rise up to the pinnacle of sainthood" and "remain wonderful forev-

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16 Goerke, a.a.O., p. 14. "Wyjadę, postanowiła Madame Pompadour i rozłożyła mapę: Wyjadę, oddalę się i jak słońce będę ci świecić bez wzajemności; zaczniesz mnie wielbić i czcić, podziwiać, cytować i kochać tak, jak cytujesz i kochasz tych, którzy—bezpiecznie oddaleni—nie dzielą z tobą odrapanego korytarza. Uniosę się aż na sam skraj świętości, odległość usankcjonuje mą wielkość i, nieskażona szarą codziennością, na zawsze pozostanę w twych oczach wspaniała!"

er” for Marian. Possessed by an inordinate desire to become a glorified, honored, admired, and cited text, she begins to rewrite passages from the Polish writer Bruno Schulz and Henryk Sienkiewicz. *She says*:

A hundred parrots, a quail, a Tibetan pigeon, and a crow: colorful birds **like a herd of thoughts**, like an impressionistic sky, **like holes after injection**—what a richness of form!<sup>17</sup>

This scene recalls, on the one hand, Schulz’s *The Night of the Great Season* (*Noc wielkiego sezonu*), and on the other, the phrase “a herd of thoughts” (*stado myśli*) from Sienkiewicz’s *The Deluge* (*Potop* 1886). Schulz writes:

And **the sky broke out in a colorful, teeming rash**, in blotches which grew and spread, and was filled with a strange tribe of birds, circling and revolving in great crisscrossing spirals. (...) The sky now resembled those **in old murals**, full of monsters and fantastic beasts, which circled around, passing and eluding each other in elliptical maneuvers.<sup>18</sup>

She rewrites the masterpieces of Schulz and Sienkiewicz in a playful postmodern manner to open an intertextual dimension. Nevertheless, in the next paragraph, the image of “the sky broke out in a colorful, teeming rash,” which is associated with murals (*fresco*) in Schulz’s work, transforms immediately. In Madame Pompadour’s allusion, it becomes “like small holes after an injection (*dziurki po zastrzyku*),” suggesting that the whole image is a drug-induced illusion.

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17 Goerke, a.a.O., p. 14. “Sto papug, przepiórka, tybetański gołąb oraz wrona: kolorowe ptaki jak **stado myśli**, jakniebo imresjonisty, jak **dziurki po zastrzyku**—cóż za bogactwo form!”

18 Bruno Schulz, *Proza* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1964), p. 156. “I wnet zaroiło się niebo jakąś kolorową wysypką, osypało się falującymi ptakami, które rosły, dojrzewały i wnet napęliły przestworze dziwnym ludem ptaków, krążących i kołujących w wielkich, krzyżujących i kołujących w wielkich, krzyżujących się spiralach. (...) Niebo stało się podobne do starego frecku, pełnego dziwolągów i fantastycznych zwierząt, które krążyły, wymijały się i znów wracały w kolorowych elipsach.” The English translation of this novel is cited from: Bruno Schulz, *The Street of Crocodiles and Other Stories*, trans. Celina Wieniewska, (London: Penguin Book, 2008), p. 92



We should not overlook the fact that the imagery of flying birds occurs two more times. As the story draws to a close, it is shortened in each repetition. The first repetition occurs when Marian goes out to buy paintbrushes, so he can repaint the hallway. The narrator says:

A hundred parrots, a quail, a Tibetan pigeon and a crow: colorful birds like a herd of thoughts, like an impressionistic sky. And I will go into it, declares Madame Pompadour: In Mnumbwa surely the sun shines.<sup>19</sup>

The second one implies that her dream of leaving Marian for Mnumbwa fades, and she begins to repaint the hallway with him. The narrator says:

Offering a hundred parrots, a quail, a Tibetan pigeon, and a crow to the fortune-teller, Madame Pompadour picks up a brush.<sup>20</sup>

Here, we see two contradictory phenomena: one shows that Goerke's literary journey consists of the very act of writing and reading literary texts, while the other shows that this brilliant journey is in danger of erosion.

## Conclusion

Based on these observations, one can say that in "Before the Storm," the places described, the places of writing, and the places of reading are in reciprocal as well as independent movement. On this point, Goerke belongs to "the literature on the move."

Intertextuality plays an increasingly important role in the field of 21st-century Polish literature. Paweł Huelle's *Mercedes-Benz* (2001) is associated with the style of Bohumil Hrabal, and his "*Castorp*" (2004) reworks motifs from Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. Anna Boleckas novel, *Dearest Franz (Kochany Franz)* (1999) consists of fictive letters

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19 Goerke, a.a.O., p. 16. "Sto papug, przepórka, tybetański gołąb oraz wrona: kolorowe ptaki jak stado myśli, jak niebo impresjonisty. A w tym pojadę, postanowiła Madame Pompadour: w Mnumbwie na pewno świeci słońce."

20 Goerke, a.a.O., p. 17. "Ofiarując wróżce sto papug, przepiórkę, tybetańskie gołębia oraz wronę, Madame Pomadour złapała za pędzel."

written by Franz Kafka. In Tokarczuk's *Runners* (Bieguni 2007) the physical movement of its characters closely resembles people drifting through virtual space. In today's view, the intertextual features these works have in common had already become apparent in "Before the Storm."

Yet, we should not overlook the fact that Goerke offers a unique point of view. The unstable character of this story's textual imagery makes us turn our eyes towards the exterior of the literary journey and notice that everything, including the textual imagery, is in flux. For this very reason, the phrase "a storm is coming," which repeats throughout the story, highlights the uncertain and ill-omened future. Moreover, the hallway serves not only as a motif for conflict and resolution, but also as a buffer zone, wherein no one knows when the next conflict will occur. Madame Pompadour abandons her literary journey and decides to stay with her absolute "other," Marian.

Here, it will be useful to remember that in the 1990s borderlands had a special connotation in Poland. The 1960s generation, in particular, took the initiative to reveal previously unknown traces of otherness in the borderlands where they were born. The struggle to rediscover their homeland, not as natives but as strangers, as found in the early works of Tokarczuk and Huelle, can be understood in this context. However, in Goerke's case, we see another approach. As Molisak identifies in her remark on how Goerke "creates a new space, a kind of buffer zone unable to be appropriated," she does so to shrink a serious international problem into the banal conflict between Madame Pompadour and Marian. She also does this to simultaneously show that superficial appeasement, such as repainting the hallway light blue, promotes no "mutual understanding" in the true sense of the words.

The creative imagination of space and places in contemporary Polish literature demands more precise and systematic investigation. Not all the works of women writers living abroad from the beginning of the 1990s would be appropriate examples. However, frameworks such as "East-Central European literature" or the "mystic homeland in Contemporary Polish literature" are insufficient for discussing this subject. We should extend the range of observation into "travel writings" and reread them, focusing on their manner of depicting space and places.