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(E)Migration and Displacement: Melancholy as a Revolutionary Gesture in Prose by Women

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(E)Migrating scholarship

This chapter is devoted to the theme of (e)migration and travelling and the process of transgressing one's own language, culture, moral code, habits and worldview, which results from the experience of dislocation, as well as to its opposition—namely, the notion of citizenship. I present a selection of recent Polish literary texts by women that address precisely these motifs and problems. I claim that there is a strong presence of melancholy in all texts that deal with migration, but that this melancholy, when it appears in texts written by women, plays a significantly different role from the traditionally understood melancholy: instead of apathy and withdrawal from the world, the "melancholy of the woman's text" may be read as an impeachment of patriarchal culture and a statement of dissatisfaction, behind which lies a demand to change the world. It can be seen as a kind of active, transgressive melancholy, however oxymoronic this may sound.

An enormous amount of scholarly research has been undertaken on migration during past ten years or so. Such scholarship is usually conducted according to the interdisciplinary method where connections are made between the fields of social studies, politics, statistics, economics, cultural studies and also, although somewhat marginally, literary research. Research on migration has been made possible thanks to the numerous academic centres focusing on migration studies, some of them very new.[1] Migration and emigration are currently regarded as important themes in understanding the contemporary world.[2] All such centres and projects focus on the migration experience and on so-called "border studies." The

[1] Such as University College London's Migration Research Unit (Department of Geography) and Centre for Research and Analysis of Migration (CReAM, Department of Economics), the Centre for the Study of Migration at Queen Mary College, the Sussex Centre for Migration Research at Sussex University, the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) and International Migration Institute (IMI) at the University of Oxford.

[2] Among recent initiatives, see the series of seminars held in 2013 at the UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies entitled *eMigrating Landscapes*.

history of humanity is understood as the history of crossing borders: the physical borders of the tribe, polis, town, state, continent, but also the borders of one's own culture and language. Meanwhile the history of transgressing these borders becomes the history of political, social and cultural conflicts, the history of wars. Understood in this sense, a border (boundary or limit) can hardly claim to be a new theme for research. Yet, in the contemporary world, the crossing of borders and the transgressive element that comes with it (the gesture of discontent, criticism of what is within the borders) needs to be redefined. Utopian plans for a common Europe, a global world, the idea of citizenship of the world (with its alleged ease of travelling and communication, the possibility of living anywhere)[3] have brought an illusion of freedom from the burden of borders, and hence of freedom from the experience of emigration—and connected with this: from the potentially painful exposure to other cultures and the experience of becoming a foreigner, subject to other people's hospitality, which, as we know from Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle (2000), is not an equal relationship, because it assumes a total tolerance of and agreement to Otherness and strangeness, which cannot be achieved.

For some time, we—or many of us—have wanted to believe that it is possible to do away with borders (first the geographical, then the political, linguistic, social and cultural). Europe without borders was a big dream, but what has resulted from this dream is the above-mentioned body of research on the phenomenon of borders. For some time there was a sense that the borders of the state could be eliminated, but the collapsing dream of a common Europe seems to confirm their rigidity and persistence, especially in a time of economic crisis, when the rhetoric of sides and allies has a tendency to return. Wisława Szymborska in her well-known poem "Psalm" (from the collection *A Large Number,* 1976) sees borders as a human invention, while the whole of nature is described as disrespecting them. She concludes the poem as follows: "Only what is human can be truly foreign. / The rest is mixed vegetation, subversive moles, and wind." (Szymborska 1995, 100) Maybe this interpretation can provide the concept of a border with a new, or additional function: a border that divides into "ours and theirs" (into what is known and what is strange)—the dichotomy may thus become a *sine qua non* of what it means to be human, since to be human in this sense is to

[3] Julia Kristeva, for example, expressed her concern about the utopian element of cosmopolitanism as follows: "In today's unprecedented intermixing of foreigners on earth, two extreme solutions are taking shape: either we are heading towards a global united states […] Or else the humanistic cosmopolitanism shows itself to be utopic, and particularistic aspirations force one to believe that small political sets are the optimal structures to insure the survival of humanity." (1991, 98)

create that which is strange or foreign ("obce"). In this way the foreigner is the guarantor of the human.

Among the several examples of contemporary Polish women's writing that I discuss, I concentrate in particular on one case of emigration writing, that of Wioletta Grzegorzewska (b. 1974) and her experience of dislocation and its inevitable melancholy, but where melancholy, experienced especially in her roles as a woman (and chiefly as a mother) acquires transgressive value as a criticism of traditional roles, repressive cultural and social structures, narrow worldviews on both sides of the border.

If melancholy brings the suspension of identity, the painful experience of being in-between, it also provides a chance for re-evaluation: for a critique of normative culture. Melancholy as a painful path to realization of one's position and its transgressive re-evaluation is perhaps one of the most valuable critical voices to emerge in Polish contemporary literature. This melancholy in contemporary (e)migrating women's writing addresses the theme of displacement juxtaposed with notions of the body, social roles, family, motherhood, romantic love, education or work. Femininity understood in traditional ways is at stake: that is, the role of the heterosexual, submissive woman ("kobieta ofiarnicza") is retold.

Sadness is the lining of the world: three features of writing by Polish women[4]

Literature is born out of pain. It is a desperate attempt to tame the omnipresent disappointment with the world, to restore some kind of sense or meaning to it, some plot or narrative. Writer on melancholy, Antoni Kępiński, concluded that "sadness is human destiny" (1996, 13). In a similar melancholic spirit, the 19th-century author Eliza Orzeszkowa wrote that "life is lavishly seasoned with sadness" (1896, 4-5)—maybe because, as contemporary writer Manuela Gretkowska puts it, "the world is defective, incomplete" (1999, 8).

Melancholy is inscribed into the structure of reality, into the fabric of the world, just as it is into our individual development (at least that's how we are accustomed to think of it

[4] The image "the lining of the world" is taken from Czesław Miłosz's poem "Meaning" ("Sens," from the collection *Provinces,* 1991): "—When I die, I will see the lining of the world. / The other side, beyond bird, mountain, sunset. / The true meaning, ready to be decoded. / What never added up will add up, / What was incomprehensible will be comprehended." (Miłosz 2001, 569) My paraphrase of Miłosz's term "lining of the world" implies a melancholic interpretation of his text. The other side of the world, the one which we long for, and which links us to the destructive instinct for death, is in essence a longing for Kristeva's primordial unity, the Sick or maternal Thing, the bond with the mother that precedes consciousness of self.

since Freud[5]). The mother is held responsible for this lack—for the sadness, longing, pain of existence, melancholy. The mother, who gives life and offers momentarily a symbiotic bond, in fact condemns us to painful separation, to isolation, which is always interwoven with the spectre of death. Referring to, yet at the same time reinterpreting Freud, Luce Irigaray and Kristeva, Judith Butler describes the state of melancholy: "The melancholic refuses the loss of the object, and internalization becomes a strategy of magically resuscitating the lost object, not only because the loss is painful, but because the ambivalence felt toward the object requires that the object retained until differences are settled" (1990, 62-63). Hence the crucial thing is the loss, which constantly reminds us of the presence and possibility of death. "[...] I am obsessed with death. Generic and individual," says the female narrator of Justyna Bargielska's 2010 debut collection of mini prose pieces about loss, written for "those who do not like to forget" (see the author's comment on the back cover). "Bronka says she is obsessed too, and quotes me some eighty-year-old woman writer: 'Already as a child, I felt that forcing someone into existence was an absurd abuse. Everyone should be asked whether they wouldn't prefer simply not to be.'" (Bargielska 2010, 18)

The first of the three features of writing by women that I wish to highlight is what I term "melancholic vindication." It is basically a melancholic question about the sense of existence, about the conviction of its lack of sense or absurdity. The ceaseless narrative about the existential entity, reason or condition concealed behind the performative "I am" is—or so it would seem—one of the particular features of literature, and especially of the most recent prose. This is how, for the purposes of the current chapter, I recognize literary texts published since the beginning of the 1990s, of writers who have made their debuts since then and who were born in the 1960s or later. This literature, prose that appeared after 1989, has its own peculiar character just like in any other decade, but this does not mean we should not focus on its peculiarity and try to describe it. The twenty-year period 1989-2010 (Chowaniec 2012)—still ongoing, however, and soon to become thirty years—has been a time in Polish culture, and also in European culture, particularly disposed towards redefining identity. Hence the unprecedented career of the concept of *identity* (Polish: tożsamość) in the 1990s, and of further concepts in turn which this category brought with it: identification, one's own, the foreign, the other (or Other), tolerance, difference, diversity, national identity or belonging, local belonging, globality, and so on. Post-communist transformation on the

[5] See, for example, Freud's 1917 paper *Mourning and Melancholia*. In the current chapter, I read Freud through Julia Kristeva's *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (1989) as well as Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990).

political and economic level provoked a genuine revolution in social and cultural relations. The new "freedom" had somehow to be named, defined and understood (Czapliński 2001 and 2002) and—even though literature, and especially literary criticism, had said good-bye to any kind of engagement of literature in anything at all—literature was to record this change (or rather, this exchange of values, the directions taken by discussion and theory, as well as the inspirations), somehow capture and narrate it.

It comes as no surprise that this narrative in the version published by the best-known, most widely read and critically acclaimed Polish women writers of the last two decades is not a happy one. And the pessimism of their story is not unconnected with the political dimension to the women's movement. The stories related in contemporary women's prose are a bitter diagnosis of disappointment with the new reality, which promised much but did not deliver—just as bitter as that of Maria Janion in her now famous speech to the First Women's Congress (held in Warsaw 20-21 June 2009), when she concluded that the years 1989-2009 had shown that "Democracy in Poland had a masculine gender."[6]

This disenchantment with reality and the expression of melancholic sadness is, then, one of the most visible characteristics of Polish women's writing of the two decades following transformation of the political and economic system. The women's sadness also contains the element of reviewing a particular social, cultural and existential position and the associated vindication of one's rights.

The second feature I particularly wish to emphasize is the acquisition of the feminist and gender perspective, stressed in Maria Janion's speech. The gender dimension to literary texts by women published during the past twenty years, courageous and self-vindicating (only not in relation to the male or masculine, but also to the oppressively heteronormative culture), has been of crucial importance in redefining culture, although we should note that this has not always been a feature positively received by literary criticism. The feminist commentator and literary historian Kazimiera Szczuka, for example, has tried to counteract some of Przemysław Czapliński's criticisms of literature by women as, among other things, boring, passive, and formulaic.[7]

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[6] "For years I was well aware of the clear division between serious and non-serious matters: in times of oppression the struggle for independence is considered a serious matter, and the fight for women's rights is not. [...] I believed that freedom for the whole society should be achieved first, and then, together and peacefully, we would improve women's conditions. To my surprise, it transpired that a woman was to be a "family creature" in liberated Poland, a creature who—instead of engaging in politics—should take care of the home. It took some time before I realized that democracy in Poland has a masculine gender" (quoted in Chowaniec 2012, 5).

[7] "In defiance of Maria Janion and her book *Women and the Spirit of Otherness* (Kobiety i duch inności, 1996) [...] of her including women's writing in Romantic, political and transgressive contexts, Czapliński proposes the formula: 'Women and the Spirit of Identity' (Kobiety i duch tożsamości). In his book bearing the significant

Olga Tokarczuk, in her hybrid novel or treatise on travelling entitled *Runners* (*Bieguni*, 2007), combines the gender perspective with the question of existence and its uncertain, unfixed status. At the beginning of the book, in the opening passage entitled "I am" ("Jestem"), we read:

> That evening was the far edge of the world, I felt by chance while playing, unintentionally. I discovered it because they left me on my own for a moment, weren't keeping an eye on me. [...]. Doors shut, hatches closed, blinds drawn. I wanted to go out but there was nowhere to go. Only my presence took on distinct contours, which trembled, undulated, and that hurt. At a particular moment I discovered the truth: there's nothing to be done: I am. (Tokarczuk 2007, 6)

Tokarczuk goes on to describe the woman traveller and her ways of perceiving a world constantly on the move or in a state of flux. Since she implies that the astonishment or fear of being (fear of that absolute, almost Kafkaesque definition "I am") may somehow be tamed or domesticated through movement, travelling, an existence like that of the eponymous Runners. And this movement, travelling, migration, is the third feature of contemporary women's literature to which I would particularly like to draw attention, and on which I shall concentrate in this chapter. My specific emphasis will be on *nomadic existence as a metaphor for loss*.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, movement, travel, journeys abroad and returns home have been the much repeated threads of a general leitmotif in prose texts by women. Inscribed into this leitmotif is a multiplicity of associated problems, such as the redefinition of "émigré" or "emigration" literature in the new "liberated" reality (Chowaniec 2011a), the establishment of new identities for the modern contemporary woman, for the contemporary woman traveller (Chowaniec 2010),[8] as well as a critique of the political, economic and

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title *The Effect of Passivity: Literature in Normal Times* (*Efekt bierności. Literatura w czasie normalnym*, 2004) he criticizes novels written by women for women as boring, petty bourgeois [...]. Not only all 'spirit of otherness' but even reality itself has supposedly evaporated from women's literature, making way for escapism and consumption." (Szczuka 2008). Also, in an earlier interview: "Janion's diagnoses about the transgressivity or subversiveness of women's voices in culture are a lot deeper, and reach back to the 19th century, portraying examples of symbolic imagination both Polish and European. Czapliński's diagnoses relate to the social here and now, the current state of mentality. [...] Yet many women, whom we may regard as popular, somehow slip out of the bag. For example, Marta Dzido, author of *Clam* (Małż, 2003), a novel written in contemporary language about a young educated woman's experiences of the job market."(Szczuka 2006).

[8] On travelling and the changes to identity, essential to the Polish debate on modernity, is Wieczorkiewicz 2008. In this valuable work the problem of travel becomes one of consumption. Seen in this perspective, the question of identity in contemporary society is written into the development of modern capitalism (analyzed here through

social changes that have taken place over the last twenty to thirty years, including changes to borders, to legal regulations affecting the crossing of borders, and to international and inter-state relations. In this context two dates have a special significance for the periodization of literature: 1989, as the year marking the end of communism—two important texts, which deal with this particular theme each in its own way, are Manuela Gretkowska's novel *We're All Emigrants Here* (*My zdes' emigranty,* 1995) and Izabela Filipiak's collection of stories *The Blue Menagerie* (*Niebieska menażeria,* 1997); and 2004, as the year when the European Union expanded to incorporate ten countries of Central and Eastern Europe, including Poland—in this context a number of novels appeared by women, which were weaker from the literary point of view but recorded a new model of emigrant experience, such as Iwona Słabuszewska-Krauze's *Hotel Irlandia* (2006) and Dana Parys-White's *Emigrant by Choice* (*Emigrantka z wyboru,* 2008), or the autobiographical texts by Justyna Tomańska *A Polish Woman in London* (*Polka w Londynie,* 2004) and *A Polish Woman in Madrid* (*Polka w Madrycie,* 2005).

Yet another contingent theme to the subject of movement in literature is its denial or negation: putting down roots, making oneself feel at home, settling down. In Polish literature, this associated theme established itself as a critique of the historical and political upheavals of the 20th century: movement, leaving or departure, migration, is inscribed into every text of the so-called "small homelands" trend, which became so important in Polish prose of the 1990s (Czapliński 2001). The whole atmosphere of Olga Tokarczuk's novel *Primeval and Other Times* (*Prawiek i inne czasy,* 1996) is pervaded by a sense of threat posed by some catastrophe to an idyllic homeliness—though not devoid of evil or violence, to the familiarity of one's own world. The possibility of transgressing the mythical boundaries of the home (familiar) territory, demarcated for instance by rivers or forests, is already apparent at the beginning of the novel in the threat brought by war and the departure of the man, Michał. However, it is the woman who is the carrier of the values that comprise "rootedness," or "homeliness" or "domestication." Her gesture of indefinite waiting devalues the transgression of the borders by men. At the end of the novel, the "small homeland" is finally deconstructed by a woman's departure. Her crossing of the boundaries is decisive. Thus when Adelka returns for a moment, her arrival from over there, from far away, becomes a metaphor for the final end of the mythic Home—of what is Permanent. Bidding farewell to Primeval, she turns

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such categories as authenticity and its disappearance, the phenomenon of taking photographs, enjoying new tastes when travelling, or advertising).

the coffee-grinder which, like the water mill, is a symbol of transience, the sifting of one state into another, of fluidity itself.

Primeval and Other Times can be seen as a prelude to the later treatise on travelling, the above-mentioned *Runners*, in which Tokarczuk defines modernity ultimately in categories of movement, change, the negation of what is Permanent.

Modern, contemporary emigration becomes migration; often it is appears to be travelling out of choice, of one's own free will. Contemporary travel or tourism is no longer a temporary distancing from home, but has become a way of life, since Home itself is now always only short-term. Home has been destroyed, like it was for many Poles during World War II—as in Ewa Kujawska's novel *Małgorzata's House* (*Dom Małgorzaty,* 2007)—by bombs; or post-war by the abortive architecture and buildings of the People's Republic, such as the blocks and housing estates central to Joanna Bator's novel *Sandy Hill* (*Piaskowa góra,* 2009). While I shall concentrate in the present chapter on post-1989 migration, it is significant that several prominent contemporary Polish women writers connect this present-day experience existentially with the vast and traumatic forced displacement and migrations of populations as a result of the post-war settlements and shifting westwards of the borders of the Polish state, as in Tokarczuk's *House of Day, House of Night* (*Dom dzienny, dom nocny,* 1998) or Inga Iwasiów's *Bambino* (2008). Home has lost its roots, the ghosts of former generations and the stability of fixed neighbourhood—the things that defined what was Permanent, and has become only a temporary place to stay, an echo of airports, where you put away in a drawer for a while your one stable element and proof of identity: your passport. Home has therefore become an object of longing of the new emigrant, male or female, of the traveller, of the melancholic.

Migration, homelessness and women's melancholy

Travelling as a metaphor for the loss of Home is clearly a melancholic theme. The Home in *Primeval and Other Times* will never be recovered; it has become instead an impossibility, since it already belongs to a mythical reality or time (primeval time). Here, however, I would like to draw attention to the specific nature of the melancholy found in prose by women, because it does not appear in the narrative as the particular, individual sadness or nostalgia of the narratorial voice, but as a selection of themes related to the overthrowing or ruination of various orders: the order of integrated traditional stories or narratives, the order of an integrated body, the order of an integrated language (Chowaniec 2011b).

Polish women writers exploit prose in order to bring out the melancholic threads in their critique of traditional narratives, which had established relationships between the sexes according to exclusively heteronormative categories, often burdened with a priori value judgements (crucial in this context are the themes of madness in Izabela Filipiak and sexuality in Manuela Gretkowska). Lesbian or homoerotic elements are especially crucial here as a means of exploding traditional ways of thinking about loss (for example, the love of Hildegard and Małgorzata in Ewa Kujawska). And this is also a crucial factor in contestations of traditional motherhood—as in the prose of Anna Nasiłowska (2002) or Justyna Bargielska (2010), though the latter do not focus on migration as such.

The gesture of rebellion against heteronormativity is not as frequent, however, as the gesture of revealing the body's physicality: dismemberment of the body, illness, physical pain, while attention is drawn to the body's ugliness and its transparency in literary discourses questioned, and hence its gendered nature is also emphasized as a melancholic way of criticizing traditional discourses of home-making and/or uprooting. Here of particular note are *Final Stories* (*Ostatnie historie*) by Olga Tokarczuk (2004), *Polish Cleaner* (*Pani na domkach*) by Joanna Pawluśkiewicz (2006) and *Miscarriage Girls* (*Obsoletki*) by Justyna Bargielska (2010).

The final feature typical of this melancholy in women's prose is the disintegration of language: the renunciation of a cohesive narrative, the emergence of short and/or hybrid forms rather than single continuous narratives. Here an interesting example is the fascinating pseudo-autobiography by poet Wioletta Grzegorzewska *Notes from the Island* (*Notatnik z Wyspy*) published in 2012.

Note-taking as a way of framing the world: description of a displacement

This section will consist of a close reading of Grzegorzewska's *Notes from the Island*. Grzegorzewska was born 1974 in southern Poland and has published several collections of poetry, including *Wyobraźnia kontrolowana* (Częstochowa 1998), *Parantele* (Częstochowa 2003), *Orinoko* (Tychy 2008), *Inne obroty* (Toronto-Rzeszów 2010) and *Pamięć Smieny/ Smena's Memory* (London, 2011). In 2006, she left Poland and moved to the UK, where she currently resides in the town of Ryde on the Isle of Wight.[9]

Let's begin with a description of the emigrant's displacement:

[9] See also her blog *Pamięć Smeny* at blogspot http://pamiec-smieny.blogspot.co.uk/, where she records in note form her emigrant's experiences.

> 10.04.2007: Life between worlds. Life of the living and the dead. Between rural fullness and urban emptiness. In melodious dialect and Silesian mumbling. In the depths of the Polish language and in the gestation of a foreign tongue. New life in my arms and against my breast. On an autonomous island and in a unified Europe, right out on the edge. (Grzegorzewska 2012) [10]

From the outset, Grzegorzewska's experience of emigration is connected with her position as a mother: her bodily connection to the newborn baby interacts with her struggle of being on various psychological edges or borders: between the past and the present, between her familiar home town and the new place, between the mother tongue and the foreign language. Melancholy slips into the narration as a result of the writer's being in-between, since melancholy is not only a loss of speech, a slow withdrawal from the narrative (hence the "notebook" form of the work) but also the loss of oneself, as Freud famously put it: "In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself" (Freud 1989, 585), the statement that was to become one of the starting points in Judith Butler's theory of melancholic gender. In literature, through the aesthetic gesture of writing, the helplessness of melancholy can be replaced by a certain power. "The creative melancholics," writes Noelle McAfee about Kristeva, "are the ones who take part in 'that adventure of the body and signs that bears witness to the affect—to sadness as the imprint of separation and beginning of the symbol's sway'; these are the novelists, poets, and artists, who have been moved to create by the black sun of melancholia." (McAfee 2004, 66)

In Grzegorzewska we see both: the sadness of displacement and the acquisition of the new power of a symbolic domain. Thus we have a metaphorical description of the melancholic condition, with its sadness at having left things behind (the loss), the sense of distraction, helplessness, desperation, reluctance to speak, or perhaps merely disillusion with language as such:

> 14.09.2007: I have become attached to certain objects, a sure sign that I am ageing. Having moved home many times, I have learnt to evade everything, leave no traces behind. Prior to my departure for England, I burnt my personal letters and private notes. They didn't fit inside my luggage, in my rucksack or my head. And yet, when thinking about my last loft apartment, I find myself missing certain objects, various other imagined fragments which follow me on my travels.

[10] I wish to thank Marek Kaźmierski for his excellent translations of Grzegorzewska's subtle poetic language.

> 10.09.2006: I meander round this island slowly, between dreams. Feeling halved. When I fall ill, it is for weeks on end.

The melancholy of displacement, this dangerous and painful experience of loss, is slowly overcome in Grzegorzewska through subtle dialogue with the three most important elements that make up the narrator's and central character's—the textual Grzegorzewska's—world: her past, her language and her bodily experience of motherhood.

Beginning with motherhood, it is interesting that the experience of emigration in Grzegorzewska is also a motherly experience. For the main character, her two children are a way of re-defining and re-evaluating the world:

> 12.09.2007: At dawn, the Solent is invisible. The needle of the Spinnaker tower pierces the mist. A dark yacht bobs upon the water like a fly drowned in milk. On Surbiton Grove, I notice one red and two grey blotches, which sunlight then turns into cars. My five-month-old daughter is looking out of the window alongside me. How many such sights must she ingest before the world becomes visible to her?

The mother and her little daughter are in a similar situation of acquiring the world: the position of the learner is described here through the melancholic themes of dawn, water, darkness, mist and milk. Both need to learn about the new world ("ingest its sights") in order to domesticate it and make it familiar and understandable. Moreover, the emigrant mother is confronted with her son's tongue. Her children's tongue is not their mother's tongue, and this causes an interesting tension between them:

> 30.09.2007: I sneak glances at him through the window as he comes home from school. My Polish boy in his navy blue uniform, stooped, crossing Alexandra Road all alone. He enters the hallway like a cat. Discarding his tie with the Bishop Lovett School crest. Silent. He leaves this time for later. Approaches the kitchen table. Shifting gears in the translation machine.

The son's world is different from the mother's; hence they require the negotiated space of common language, the language of the emigrants' home. Yet, the shared language of intimate space between a mother and her son can become a source of embarrassment, an uncomfortable experience in the public space where foreigners unwillingly meet:

> 15. 09.2007: "Watch where you're going, you English bitch," a stranger barks at me in Polish at some car boot sale, unaware that we are both cut from the same language.

It is clear that language can become a foreigner's battlefield:

> 3.02.2008: Talking to a friend recently, I could not recall the Polish for "salmon" (łosoś). Almost twenty years ago, I was having to be taught how to speak my native tongue properly, because in my family home we communicated using the local dialect. Then I spent a few years trying to cram Russian and the same for German, then studying for my literature degree I had to listen to the pompously artificial pronunciations of fellow students, and now I am

> struggling in another new tongue, my reluctance to go over all that again so great I would rather stay silent.

We see both the narrator's awareness of losing her language (which is, of course, a metaphorical home or homeland) while, at the same time, the language itself starts to become a fascinating subject of reflection, but a subject that becomes foreign:

> 17.01.2011: I am becoming intrigued and surprised by the Polish language: its etymology, tame transmutations, ellipses, phraseology and the reflexive pronouns which we overuse. The mechanisms which since birth I have accepted as "mine" and natural are starting to erode and cause me to struggle more and more in my native tongue. And English? To my mind, it is still in its infancy, perhaps never to progress beyond nappy stage. It neither delights nor depresses me. Mr de Saussure, I have got myself into this, so where should I go next? In which language should I seek more of me?

The colloquial locution "ani parzy, ani zięb*i*" ("it neither delights nor depresses me") is very important here: the emigrant may seem detached or unfriendly, but we know "indifference is the foreigner's shield. Insensitive, aloof, he seems, deep down, beyond the reach of attacks and rejections that he nevertheless experiences with the vulnerability of a medusa" (Kristeva 1991, 7). And medusa-like Grzegorzewska—aware of losing her own language—sees the foreign land in a critical light as being a superficial and lonely land:

> 22.09.2007: The Isle of Wight is too cramped for me. I am choked by the stench of rotting roots, seaweed and moss. Local theatres staging farcical murder mysteries. On the High Street, a homeless violinist pumping concerts out of a portable amp. Locals putting on festivals in the name of garlic or tomatoes. Chinese-made junk spilling from shop fronts onto pavements. Yesterday, I enquired about work for a Polish friend in the Long John eatery. Standing by the counter, waiting to speak to the chef, I saw an elderly English woman smiling back at her own reflection in a soup bowl.

The trangressive experience of emigration is a dangerous move: what is at stake is the self, one's properly labelled identity. Grzegorzewska knows the ideological dimension to constructed identity and its seizing power (in the sense that it forces one to behave in regulated, expected algorithms). Those labels made her escape, but those labels are now

missing while the new space has become an amalgamation of the disliked, yet idealized past and the disliked but more and more domesticated "now":

> 01.03.2011: I am thinking about Poland. My country is made up of people I met up until 2006, and who in my memories are my fatherland. The places themselves are beginning to fade. Only the odd object continues to hold its shine: colours, smells, details, for example a painted steel mug from a children's ward in a district hospital, dark brown volumes of "The Quiet Don" stamped at the library in Myszków. […] Why these and not other things come to mind and play tricks with memory? People have remained intensively alive, even if they have passed away: their private tongues, gestures, phobias, emotions.

The condition of being in-between is eventually resolved. The woman-emigrant, the mother, the melancholic who needs to find another language in order to speak again, finally overcomes the seizing power of melancholy, overpowering those metaphorical waters or mists she was looking at with her daughter, and declares:

> 5.04.2012**:** I have chosen to stay in Europe, on a small piece of land the guide-books call "Dinosaur Isle," which on maps looks just like a rough-cut diamond. You will find more retirement homes here than you will schools, with many moving, from all over the British Isles, just to die in peace. I have no idea what keeps me rooted to this place, yet, when returning from London to Ryde, crossing the Solent on board a ferry or a hovercraft, I now have the strange sensation I am sailing home.

This is the story of Grzegorzewska's displacement, on various levels: from home, from her body and—probably the most drastic one—from her language. Displacement is a transgression in the dictionary meaning of the word: exceeding a limit or boundary, it suggests behaviour that violates socially acceptable norms. Transgression is an act of aggression. It is a cruel, slow act of de-identification. It is a form of solitude, even the solitude of a mother taking care of a "new life". Of course, the condition of de-identification requires a prior set of identifying labels. And this is guaranteed by home, by a place, by this "somewhere" from where one comes. "Identities are malleable and multidimensional, and I am reluctant to fix my own through reifying labels," writes one author who learned to deal with problems of identity, displacement and homelessness throughout writing. "And yet," she continues, "we do not only define ourselves; we are also defined by our circumstances,

culture, the perceptions of others and—perhaps most of all—the force of an internalized past." (Hoffman 2005, 27)

Identification comes from outside and perhaps increasingly so in the globalized 21st century: from language, from neighbours, from the past. In this sense—from our home. Therefore wherever we are, we search for home and this search is accompanied—especially in the case of emigration—with the difficult struggle with language, so clearly demonstrated by Grzegorzewska.

Notions of citizenship and emigration: women as eternal strangers

The case of Wioletta Grzegorzewska and her emigration brings up the notion of belonging, which is especially important when the category of women's writing is discussed in the context of Polish literature. The use of the feminine forms "Polka" or "obywatelka" (a Polish woman, a female citizen)—even though the Polish language allows them—runs counter to their attempts at participation in serious (political, philosophical, legal) discourses because of the normative perception of them as inferior and even frivolous. As was demonstrated by Simone de Beauvoir years ago, political nouns referring to a subject, such as politician, senator, minister and citizen, are male. A man is a Subject, a woman is the Other. In Poland, men are the citizens, women are "cudzoziemki" (foreigners). At least this is how Polish women writers have often been described by literary critics (Czapliński 2009, 297-303). Usage of the word "cudzoziemki"[11] itself demonstrates literary criticism's need to locate women's writing within identity politics, rather than to search for the creative and transgressive character of women's creativity (which was accentuated by Maria Janion, as noted above). Yet, even though second wave feminism, and certainly feminism in Poland since the 1990s, has not been keen to address the category of citizenship, it is nevertheless worth discussing, especially in connection with the category of "foreigner" as a synonym for the Polish woman (as perceived in women's writing). The questions that arise here are: Why have women writers been seen as foreigners in their own country? And why, as a consequence, have they been conceptualized as foreigners who have no chance of ever being at home?

In this context, Izabela Filipiak's short story "Weronika: Portrait with a Cat" ("Weronika. Portret z kotem") from *The Blue Menagerie* (1997) is especially interesting.

[11] The word "cudzoziemka" is associated in the history of Polish women's writing with the 1935 novel by Maria Kuncewiczowa, of this title. Later this same word was used in the plural ("Cudzoziemki") by Grażyna Borkowska as the title of her 1996 study on Polish women's writing 1845-1918.

It is a narrative by and about a female student from the city of Gdańsk, the cradle of the Solidarity movement. The narrator describes in retrospect her stay in the house of Weronika and Weronika's son, Seweryn, in Gdańsk at the time of the movement's birth**.** The narrator, a "new Polish woman" of the 1990s, does not mythologize the fatherland and its political past. The protagonist depicts the time she spent with Weronika as magical, full of music and art, and ripe with expressions of radical, unconventional attitudes towards the world (they listen to hippy music, smoke, discuss international affairs, literature and art). All this ends the day Weronika and her son become involved in the underground anti-communist movement. The narrator portrays the gradual change in Weronika from an open-minded, liberated, free-thinking woman and liberal mother, into a patriotic freedom fighter, a stereotypical Polish Mother (on the notion of the Polish Mother in literature see, for example, Mrozik 2010 and 2012). This transformation affects not only the relationship between the protagonist and Weronika, but also the formerly close bond between mother and son. The new political circumstances, which require a re-thinking of their duties as citizens, create an unbearable hierarchy between mother and son, as the new order embraces traditional roles and obligations:

> While earlier on she wanted to be everything for him, now she became a law, the defender of national values, family rights and sacred, maternal rights. He hated her, I think, for this transformation. (Filipiak 1997, 151)

The new obligations require not only active participation in the material sense, but the re-valuing of religion and gender. Weronika's engagement in clandestine (patriotic) work must remain limited to support of her son. Underground activity is generally depicted as a male thing:

> At the back of the church, in the library that was left there and was still being extended, and thanks to the willingness of the academic teachers, a temporary, clandestine university was created. It was a winter evening, when one of my friends, who I knew very well from the meeting in Seweryn's apartment [...] stopped me in the front of the church gate and explained, as gently as he could, that I could not come in. My friends discover in these hard times, just like the Renaissance scholars in their day, that the unpredictable female element could interfere with the seriousness of their meeting. (Filipiak 1997, 153)

Filipiak places her narrator in opposition to the mythical aura of Solidarity. The masculine nature of Solidarity as an organization is hereby exposed. Filipiak, as one of the first women writers to emerge in the 1990s, shows the importance of exposing the deceitfulness of the exclusive "manly faces" behind every struggle in so-called "hard

times" and the misogynist fear, so well known from history, of "female elements" in politics.[12] Moreover, the narrator describes the role of a woman and mother in such hard times, and her inevitable fate. Both are rejected—whether they oppose the traditional female role (as the protagonist does) or conform to it (as Weronika does when playing her role as a good mother and carer). Men turn against them as soon as women fulfil their role. Once she has prepared her son for the struggle, even at the cost of sacrificing her relationship with him, Weronika, and indeed the narrator, must be rejected as the alien element which is at odds with, and perhaps even spoils, the serious spirit of the men's clandestine meetings. The choice that women face following this rejection is either to accept their position or to rebel against patriotic exploitation. However, Weronika makes neither of these choices, and consequently goes insane. Weronika's madness, her bodily suffering and death are a literary metaphor for the marginalization of women and their bodies. Weronika's insanity symbolizes her lack of ultimate acceptance of her redundancy in patriarchal society. As a punishment she has to be marginalized by the patriarchal order and put beyond social configuration and language.[13]

Through her creation of the narrator and of Weronika, Filipiak represents women who tried to engage in the political and social struggles of the day. The turmoil of the 1980s, even when shown through the deconstruction of its mythical foundations, was nevertheless an important, inherent part of the lives of Filipiak and her peers. Filipiak's retrospective look at the 1980s is critical, as she accuses the past of destroying individual lives (women's lives) through engagement in often illusory roles. Female citizenship, understood as the possibility of gaining agency in decision-making processes, fails in Filipiak's story.

A man can be a citizen and an activist, a woman is only a co-inhabitant and helper… Thirty years after the beginning of Solidarity and sixteen after the publication of *The Blue Menagerie* the situation of women in Polish politics does not appear any different. "I love women, I understand what they want with this party, but Poland is too poor for your demands," wrote a fan on the forum of The Women's Party in 2007, and the statement was later incorporated into book-diary form by Manuela Gretkowska, founder of the party (2008, 114-115). The right of women to be equal players in the Polish public sphere, and hence also the efforts to bring women back from the symbolic exile established by the notion of

[12] See for example Shana Penn's book, *Women's Underground* (*Podziemie kobiet*, 2003) with the illuminating, though brief introduction by Maria Janion.

[13] The connection between madness and women's writing was explored at length in the now classic work by Gilbert and Gubar (2000), originally published in 1979.

citizenship,[14] seems to be of secondary importance in post-transformational Poland. Despite the strong presence of women on the literary and artistic scene in the 1990s (as in Solidarity in the 1980s!), Polish women have failed to secure for themselves the position of citizens, i.e. equal and serious players in the public realm.

Nevertheless I think that women's writing has taken a particularly interesting turn when it comes to reassessing the "common understanding" of the state and female citizenship in Poland since 1989. As Nick Stevenson argues,

> The power to name, construct meaning and exert control over the flow of information within contemporary societies is one of today's central structural divisions. Power is not solely based upon material dimensions, but also involves the capacity to throw into question established codes and to rework frameworks of common understanding. (Stevenson 2003, 4)

This was the case in Filipiak's story, where the mainstream heroic narratives about Solidarity—a landmark in Polish citizens' identity in the 1990s—are challenged. Women writers became particularly involved in presenting women's public and political agency or women's exclusion from so-called "state" matters *(*"sprawy wagi państwowej") in direct or indirect ways. These literary efforts may be called, in the words of Joseph May, "performances of citizenship" that present "sphere[s] of metaphoric, literal and performed possibilities available in different arenas of the everyday through which communities and individuals access (successfully or not) the experience called citizenship." (May 1999, 3) The shift from *being a citizen* to the *performance of citizenship* makes the category more open, especially to individuals who would otherwise be considered "inauthentic" citizens, such as migrants, emigrants, outcasts.

Every society nevertheless has a particular image of the idealized citizen's body, which mainly describes the proper citizen's behaviour within his (sic!) rights and obligations. In Poland after 1989 the notion of citizenship needed to be redefined because of the political transformation. Through the vehicle of women's writing, questions were raised surrounding the ideal female citizen but as result, because a woman does not have a constitutive position in the discourse of citizenship, the debate on female citizenship kept

[14] As Ruth Lister argues in her sub-chapter "The exile of the female," "While the cloak of invisibility is set aside, it is usually to treat the history of women's exclusion from citizenship as no more than an historical aberration or mistake, now more or less effectively remedied. […] It has been one of the major contributions of feminist scholarship to illuminate the way in which the civic-republican conception of the citizen *was* 'aggressively male,' so that the exclusion of the female […], far from being an aberration, was integral to the theory and practice of citizenship in both the republican and liberal traditions." (Lister 2003, 70)

slipping away into other discourses (such as those on motherhood, sexual behaviour, mental health, domesticity and so on), which do not tend to be regarded as part of the literary talk about the political, about society, about Polish citizenship and emigration.

The most important themes in writing by women (novels, short stories, mini-prose, hybrid forms) that bring together notions of the female body, women's participation in public life and citizenship as a means of gaining agency, fall into basically three categories.

First, there is the *body of the political or deliberately non-political emigrant*. Here, we encounter problems of emigration devoid of any ideological background. Women emigrants are shown as free-floating nomads, happy with their "uprootedness" ("wykorzenienie") and disengagement with a fatherland which they present—directly or indirectly—as oppressive, as in *We're Emigrants Here* (*My zdes' emigranty*, 1995) by Manuela Gretkowska, *Death and the Spiral* (*Śmierc i spiral*, 1991) by Izabela Filipiak and later *The Blue Menagerie* (1997), discussed above, and also *Polish Cleaner* (*Pani na domkach*) by Joanna Pawluśkiewicz (2006). The woman emigrant is portrayed as a critic of Polish national discourses of citizenship.

Second, the body of a very particular Polish woman emigrant: *the figure of the cleaning lady abroad*, again in *Polish Cleaner* by Joanna Pawluśkiewicz, as well as in *Room Numbers* (*Numery*, 1999) by Olga Tokarczuk and *Przystupa* (2007) by Grażyna Plebanek. Here the perspective of the cleaning lady working abroad is used as a means of class and economic critique of who is a good citizen.

Third, the body of *the melancholic woman mourning the loss of belonging to a state, country, family, idea, identity, class or religion*, as in *Total Amnesia* (*Absolutna amnezja*, 1995) by Izabela Filipiak, *World-Viewer* (*Światowidz*. 1999) by Manuela Gretkowska, *Clam* (*Małż*, 2003) by Marta Dzido, *Woman* (*Kobieta*, 2002) and *Sandy Hill* (*Piaskowa góra*, 2009) by Joanna Bator, *Bambino* (2008) by Inga Iwasiów and *Małgorzata's House* (*Dom Małgorzaty,* 2007) by Ewa Kujawska. The melancholy here is not only related to physical exile or emigration (as in the case of cleaning ladies working outside Poland) but to the internal exile of the "cudzoziemka" at home, and thus provides a particularly interesting perspective on reality, as the melancholic citizen is portrayed as one who has been deprived of her rights, like a foreigner, asylum seeker, or even refugee. The processes of exclusion of women from so-called "big politics" and the physical scars of that omission on the women's bodies are especially evident in the sensitive, sophisticated prose of Kujawska, Iwasiów and Bator.

The melancholic bodies of women excluded from their rights can be conceived as a field of various intersections or interconnections between gender, religion, and nationality. The sexual body is often portrayed through an ideological prism. The ideologies deconstructed in recent women's writing include the ideology of the traditional family as in Filipiak's *Total Amnesia* and Bator's *Sandy Hill*, but also, for example, in Anna Janko's *The Girl with Matches* (*Dziewczyna z zapałkami*, 2007) or Kinga Dunin's *Tabu* (1998) and *Obciach* (1999); the ideology of heterosexuality, as in *The Blue Menagerie*, or in *Fool* (*Głupiec*, 2005) by Ewa Schilling; of Catholicism, as in *Katoniela* (2007) by Ewa Madeyska; of antisemitism, as in Sylwia Chutnik's *Women's Pocket Atlas* (*Kieszonkowy atlas kobiet*, 2008) and *Babykin* (*Dzidzia* (2009).

There is a demand in women's prose for the physical body to be scrutinized as politically relevant. The pain that always accompanies physical existence eludes standard modes of signification. Nevertheless each reader, as participant in the literary communication, reads the pain through their own sufferings. In this way, reading of the body and its pain is always intertwined in a "double decoding": decoding through the body of the reader, and decoding through the political meaning of their literary representation. Pain and suffering can be seen as the perfect Other, which needs to be reclaimed by the discursive, even though at the same time it eludes the discursive. This is why the reading of the body and its pain requires constant re-reading, just like the notion of the stranger in the postcolonial context. In order to avoid orientalization, the Other needs to be constantly re-examined in its political position (for example in constructing notions of citizenship) as well as in its particularity and specificity.

Conclusion: Conquered melancholy as a critique of modernity in women's prose

In summarizing my reflections on movement, travelling, migration, homelessness and melancholy, as well as on the exclusion from citizenship portrayed in texts by Polish women after 1989, I would like to emphasize several theses that have emerged from my investigations.

The first is that there is a fundamental difference between women's melancholy as portrayed in these texts and traditional melancholic discourse. A different kind of loss and different means of dealing with it are presented: different themes, different linguistic choices, different genres, different strategies for reaching the reader.

Second, when examining melancholic prose texts, it is essential in the interests of research to distinguish between a *melancholic story* (i.e. one about melancholy, where the

narrator and/or protagonist is faced for instance by illness, a narrative which is pessimistic, recessive, full of anxiety or fear, portraying a struggle with sorrow, or a process of becoming mute), and a *story about melancholy after the battle has been won* (e.g. against illness)—or from any conquering position, which includes the consciousness of having been unfairly used or harmed by patriarchal culture, a consciousness that as a result becomes revolutionary and seeks vindication. The sadness thus becomes an active critique of reality.

Third, which is a consequence of the second point, the revolutionary gesture expresses itself as an accusing one, and makes a plea for fundamental change—for example, a change in attitudes to women who have lost preterm children through miscarriage (Justyna Bargielska's *Miscarriage Girls*), or a change in the social pressures to get married (Anna Janko's *The Girl with Matches* and Ewa Madeyska's *Katoniela*), or it expresses the truth about the loneliness of the women emigrant and the struggles involved in coping with the distance between her lost home and the alien place (Grzegorzewska).

Claiming normality—i.e. a space where the established norms (of any society, though here the emphasis in on the Polish) accept the validity of women's experience—is often linked in women's literature to nomadism or vagrancy. A person who has observed something different (the traveller, the vagrant, the outcast, the emigrant) then sees the world—and their own society—in an altered light. Hence the frequent use by contemporary women writers of female protagonists who are tourists, travellers, vagabonds—they examine the world with fresh eyes, and like what they see less and less.

Meanwhile the instability of the contemporary world, the temporary nature of every state or theory, the impossibility of being right or wrong (in the long term), is likewise reflected in the melancholic themes of contemporary women's writing, both that inspired specifically by actual emigration and that inspired by being an internal "exile" or "foreigner" ("cudzoziemka"). All stable categories—including the patriarchal—therefore require revisiting and changing. In fulfilling this function, women's melancholy becomes an active revolutionary gesture that looks forward to changing the world.

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