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A review of Andrzej Stasiuk's image of Europe

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Abstract

Andrzej Stasiuk, probably the most prominent contemporary Polish writer, is an important voice in the current discourse about Europe. In his texts, Stasiuk designs his personal Central Europe, his *mała ojczyzna*, in the sense of a *mental map*. He prefers peripheral border areas between Poland and its Eastern neighbours to centres like Warsaw. Although Stasiuk doubtlessly adds some interesting aspects to the discourse about Europe, his ideas can only serve as an intermediate stage in it. Those who look for seminal ideas will be disappointed, because:

1. Stasiuk's concept of Central Europe does not offer any solutions how to close the gap between „East“ and „West“. It merely reverses the common view by demonizing the West – globalized, soulless and damned to eternal progress – and romanticizing the East – melancholic, backward and chaotic.
2. Stasiuk only partially manages to take the step from myth to metaphor. He does work with metaphors of Europe (house, island, journey etc.), however, static and backward myths persist in his texts, such as the East-West dichotomy, the Habsburg monarchy and the Balkans.
3. Stasiuk's narrator eternally moves within the same, familiar space, which is identified as a circle of 300 km radius around his home village in the Carpathian Mountains. By doing so, he transgresses national borders, but the region he strides is relatively small and historically unencumbered. The much more problematic relationship with Germany and Russia are more or less blinded out and laden with stereotypes.
4. The narrator hardly ever communicates with people, especially if they do not belong to his *mała ojczyzna*. This perspective of the passive observer, this way of talking *about* each other instead of *with* each other, does not provide a new perspective for a cooperative future of Europe.

Keywords: Literature, Europe, Poland, metaphor, stereotype

1. Introduction

Since the fall of the Communist regime in Central and Eastern Europe, the literary discourse about Europe has been accelerating in this region and many younger writers have been continuing the work of Milan Kundera, György Konrád, Andrzej Szczypiorski and others. Among them is Andrzej Stasiuk (born in 1960), one of the most prominent and influential contemporary Polish writers whose works are received by far not only in his home country. In his essayistic prose he proves himself a postmodernist, because he is disillusioned regarding the realisation of big plans and hopes, he turns away from absolute explanatory principles and final solutions, and he criticises the consistent pursuit of innovation and progress. But what does this starting basis mean for his view on Europe? How does Stasiuk deal with Europe poetically and does he, as an important voice in the contemporary literary discourse, use the opportunity to make a seminal contribution to it? These are the questions which will be discussed in the present paper.

2. About Andrzej Stasiuk

Andrzej Stasiuk was born in Warsaw, more precisely Grochów, was expelled from school and committed himself to the Polish pacifist opposition movement *Ruch Wolność i Pokój* (‘Movement for Freedom and Peace’). He deserted the army, for which he was imprisoned for one and a half years. Memories from his youth and his experiences in prison can be found in two of his first works, *Mury Hebronu* (‘The Walls of Hebron’) and *Jak zostałem pisarzem. Próba biografii intelektualnej* (‘How I became a writer: An attempt at an intellectual biography’) – a „prose with autobiographic elements“¹. Today, Stasiuk lives in Wołowiec, a village in the Beskid Mountains close to the Slovakian border. Apart from writing, he runs his own publishing house *Czarne* together with his wife Monika Sznajderman. In 2005, he received the most important Polish award for literature, *Nike*, for his novel *Jadąc do Babadag* (‘On the road to Babadag’) which will also be cited in this paper. His image of the *enfant terrible* of contemporary Polish literature might also be a reason why his works are widely received in and outside of Poland.

3. Stasiuk's image of Europe

Stasiuk's most important text about Europe is certainly „Dziennik okrętowy“ (‘Logbook’), published in the volume *Moja Europa. Dwa eseje o Europie zwanej środkową* (‘My Europe: Two essays on the Europe called ‘Central’’) in 2000, but there are several other works that give the reader an impression of Stasiuk's image of Europe. Among them, and cited in this paper, are: *Opowieści galicyjskie* (‘Tales of Galicia’, 1995), *Dukla* (1999), *Jadąc do Babadag* (‘On the road to Babadag’, 2004), *Fado* (2006) and *Dojczland* (2007).

Stasiuk's texts on Europe identify him as a typical representative of the Polish post-communist writers, among others for the following reasons:

Generally, space is more important to him than time. Except for the allusions to the Habsburg Monarchy and Galicia respectively, the past and especially the future are widely excluded from Stasiuk's texts, according to the credo: Nothing is going to change anyway. Stasiuk's Central Europe is inactive and uneventful and damned to stagnation.ⁱⁱ This becomes clear already in one of Stasiuk's first works, the "Tales of Galicia", and continues throughout his oeuvre:

"Czterdzieści parę lat, twarz lisa przechery i ciało wyschnięte na wiór. Ostatni traktorzysta w GPR, bo traktor też ostatni, a nowych już nie będzie. Nigdy. Ale Józek nie zna tego słowa, wszak przynależy ono do dziedziny wyobraźni, i po staremu, w zniерuchomiałym czasie usiłuje w żelazne truchło tchnąć trochę życia."ⁱⁱⁱ

('40-some years, the clever face of a fox and the body parched. The last tractor driver in the agricultural production cooperative, because the tractor is also the last, and there will be no new ones. Never. But Józek doesn't know this word, it belongs to the field of imagination, and as time is standing still he does as he has always done, trying to breathe a bit of life to the iron corpse.')

In his passion for space, Stasiuk designs his own, individual Central Europe, a *mental map* that neglects the rules of national borders or the borders of the European Union. This has been referred to by the term *geopoetics*^v, which means that geography is not given, but created individually in the heads of people. This is exactly what Stasiuk does in his "Logbook":

"Posługuję się cyrklem jak dawni geografowie, odkrywcy i wodzowie starych kampanii: mierzę nim odległość. (...) Wbijam więc igłę w miejscu, gdzie teraz jestem, i wszystko wskazuje na to, że pozostanę. Drugie ramię ustawiam tam, gdzie się urodziłem, i spędziłem większą część życia. (...) Między moim Wołowcem a Warszawą jest w linii prostej circa trzysta kilometrów. Oczywiście, nie mogę oprzeć się pokusie i wykreślam wokół Wołowca trzystukilometrowy krąg, żeby określić swoją środkową Europę. Linia biegnie mniej więcej przez Brześć, Równe, Czerniowce, Kluż-Napoka, Arad, Szeged, Budapeszt, Żylinę, Katowice, Częstochowę i kończy się tam, gdzie zaczyna, czyli w Warszawie. Wewnątrz jest kawałek Białorusi, całkiem sporo Ukrainy, przyzwoite i porównywalne przetrzenie Rumunii i Węgier, prawie cała Słowacja i skrawek Czech. No i jakaś jedna trzecia Ojczyzny. Nie ma Niemiec, nie ma Rosji – co przejmuję z pewnym zdziwieniem, ale też z dyskretną atawistyczną ulgą."^{vi}

('I use a pair of compasses like the old geographers, explorers and leaders of campaigns: I use it for measuring distances. (...) So I plunge the needle in at the place where I am now, and there is much evidence that I will stay. I place the other arm where I was born and spent the bigger part of my life. (...) The distance between my Wołowiec and Warsaw is about three hundred kilometres beeline. Of course, I cannot resist the temptation and draw a circle of three hundred kilometres around Wołowiec to define my Central Europe. The line runs more or less through Brest, Równe, Chernivtsi, Cluj-Napoka, Arad, Szeged, Budapest, Żylin, Katowice, Częstochowa and ends where it started, which means in Warsaw. Inside the circle, there is a part of Belarus, quite a lot of the Ukraine, decent and comparable parts of Romania and Hungary, almost all of Slovakia and a patch of the Czech Republic. Well, and about one third of my homeland. There is no Germany, there is no Russia – what I realise with a certain surprise, but also a discrete, atavistic relief.')

This individual Central Europe can also be called Stasiuk's *mała ojczyzna* ('small homeland').^{vii} As can be seen from this, to Stasiuk regions are more important than nations, and his narrator – not only in „Logbook“ – prefers the border areas between Poland, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and the Ukraine to centres like Cracow or Warsaw. (By the way: Stasiuk underlines this in his own biography by moving from Warsaw to Wołowiec in 1986.) Linked to this cross-border view of Europe is the former Habsburg Monarchy and especially Galicia; for example when Stasiuk's narrator celebrates the birthday of Franz Joseph I of Austria, with an annual decent booze:

"W związku z powyższym zawsze osiemnastego sierpnia upijam się w sposób nostalgiczny. (...) Upijam się na chwałę ostatniego prawdziwego Cesarza (...). Można powiedzieć, że osiemnastego sierpnia piję po prostu ze strachu przed przyszłością, tak jak sto lat temu pili za zdrowie tego, co ma nadejść."^{viii}

('That is the reason why I always nostalgically get drunk on August 18th. (...) I get drunk in honour of the last great emperor (...). You could say that on August 18th I simply drink out of fear of the future, just like a hundred years ago people used to drink to what was to come.')

As this citation shows, Stasiuk's view is nostalgic and melancholic. This applies also to the people he depicts in his texts. As he wanders his personal Central Europe again and again, he takes the reader along on his countless journeys, mostly without an aim, and sheds a light on the hidden corners of a European existence nobody sees or nobody wants to see: among his favourite characters are dealers in shabby Chinese clothes in the Carpathian border area,^{ix} the Roma population especially in South Eastern Europe^x and the losers of the political and economic turn who spend all their lives in their borderland home villages^{xi}.

4. Limitations of Stasiuk's image of Europe

Now that Stasiuk's general approach has been made clear in a nutshell, it has to be asked to what extent his texts have the creative potential to make a seminal contribution to the literary discourse about Europe and not least to Europe itself. The point of this paper is just to question this creative potential. Why is that?

a) Stasiuk does not manage to take the step from myth to metaphor, which Koschmal^{xiii} regards as an important aspect in the contemporary literature about Europe. According to Koschmal, the decisive aspect is the metaphor's dynamic in comparison with the old, static and usually national myths. Myths have always played an important role (not only) in Polish literature, e.g. about the Golden Age in the 16th century, about suffering and salvation and Poland as the chosen country in the age of romanticism. For Koschmal, the metaphor is the most important stylistic device in the literature about Europe, which overcomes and replaces the old, static national myths. Stasiuk does use metaphors, for example Europe as a house, an island, a ship or a journey – these can also be found in the works of other writers. Relatively interesting and new is the metaphor of Europe as a woman with a touch of eroticism:

“Ach, Europo (...). Wpatrywałem się w twoje wizerunki i wyobrażałem sobie, że błędę gdzieś, maleńki I niewidzialny, po twoim ogromnym ciele. To była bardzo erotyczna wizja. Teraz to widzę. Ktoś dobrze to wymyślił: że kontynenty są rodzaju żeńskiego. Europo, gdybyś była mężczyzną, nie mógłbym myśleć o tobie z taką czułością.”^{xiii}

(‘O Europe! (...) Looking at your images I imagined that I, small and invisible, was wandering your huge body. This was a very erotic vision. Now I can see that. Somebody made it up brilliantly: that the continents are female. Europe, if you were a man, I would not be able to think of you with such affection.’)

Two interesting new (and in this context ironic) metaphors are those of Europe as a tram and a church, where people can get on and off and which people can join and leave at all times:

“Tak, stary kontynent był jak tramwaj, z którego można wysiąść, załatwić swoje sprawy i wskoczyć doń na innym przystanku. Albo też stary kontynent był jako kościół, z którego można na własne życzenie się ekskomunikować, a potem znów być przyjętym na łono.”^{xiv}

(‘Yes, the old continent was like a tram, which you can get off, get some work done and get on again at another stop. Or the old continent was also like a church, from which you can excommunicate yourself at your own wish and which you can later join again.’)

However, the reader can also find many allusions to old myths that create quite a static, backward image of Europe. Three examples are the revitalised myths of Galicia and the Habsburg Monarchy, the myth of the free life of the Roma population and the old dichotomy between East and West:

Firstly, Galicia and the Habsburg Monarchy are mentioned in many of Stasiuk's works, also in his “Logbook”:

“Piszę to wszystko w nocy, w poniedziałek, gdy znad Morza Czarnego nadciągnął nad Galicję (pardon, Małopolskę Wschodnią) mokry niż i leje jak z cebra.”^{xv} (...)

(‘I am writing all this at night, on a Monday, when a wet low has approached Galicia (pardon, Eastern Little Poland) from the Black Sea and it is raining cats and dogs.’)

In addition, if we look at the geographical position of Stasiuk's individual Central Europe which has already been described above, it has a lot in common with former Galicia.

Secondly, the Roma in South Eastern Europe are presented in an extremely romanticized way. In several books and essays Stasiuk depicts their life as the ideal of freedom, noble poverty, timelessness and anarchy:

“Pamiętam je lepiej, ponieważ spoglądają z jakiegoś zamierzchłego czasu i odległości, o jakich Europejczyk nie śmiałyby pomyśleć. Dlatego zawsze budzili lęk pomieszany z fascynacją, owo *tremendum et fascinans*, z jakim dociera do nas nieodgadniona przeszłość i niewyobrażalna odległość naszego pochodzenia. W istocie ucieleśniają człowieczeństwo, które trwa obok i mimo tych wszystkich wynalazków, które wymyśliliśmy, żeby ochronić nasze istnienie. Trwa obok królestw i państw, obok polityki i ekonomii, zadając im jeśli nie kłam, to niemie pytanie.”^{xvi}

(‘I remember them better, because they are looking at us from some faraway time and distance, which a European would not even dare to think about. Therefore they have always evoked fear mixed with fascination, this *tremendum et fascinans*, through which a mysterious past and the unimaginable distance of our descent touches us. In fact they embody humanity, which lasts next to and in spite of all these inventions we have made up to protect our existence. It lasts next to kingdoms and empires, next to politics and economy, which it belies or at least asks silent questions.’)

In several texts Stasiuk's narrator feels like a Rom himself or would like to be one:

“I szczerze mówiąc, sam czułem się jak Cygan z Wołoszczyzny. Zabawiałem publiczność, brałem kasę i rankiem wyglądałem pociągu.”^{xvii}

(‘And to tell the truth, I felt like a gypsy from Wallachia myself. I used to amuse the audience, take the cash and look for a train the next morning.’)

Consequently, Szczepaniak is right when she concludes (mainly referring to *Fado*^{xviii}) that the passages about Romania, Albania, Montenegro etc. are mythologised and stay attached to the mental and contextual frame of 'Galician' culture.^{xix}

Stasiuk's concept of Central Europe does not offer any solutions how to close the gap between "East" and "West", so he is not able to break the long tradition of seeing the world within this dualistic stereotype. Stasiuk merely reverses the common view by demonizing the West as a soulless, globalized place made of glass which is damned to eternal progress, and romanticizing the East as a melancholic, backward and chaotic place, but there is no creative potential and no innovative idea in this.^{xx} Especially in *Dojczland*, the eternal comparisons between East and West are exhausted beyond the bearable level.

Concerning Western Europe, Germany for example is only acceptable for Stasiuk (or his narrator – it is never clear who is speaking) where he can see parallels to the East, for example the railway station in Stuttgart which reminds him of Bucharest^{xxi}, or the people in East Berlin and Frankfurt who behave like people in South Eastern Europe:

"(...) facetami o ósmej rano w knajpach ze wzrokiem wbitym w zawieszony pod sufitem telewizor. Tak było w albańskiej Sarandzie i tak jest tu."^{xxii}
(‘(...) guys with sunken-in faces who are staring at a television hanging from the ceiling in a pub at eight in the morning. That’s how it was in Saranda in Albania and that’s how it is here.’)

The influence of the West on the East is always rated negatively from a postcolonial point of view. In several texts, Central and Eastern Europe are depicted as the landfill of Europe, covered by things that have become useless for the West:

"Na dobrą sprawę całe miasto należy do Merca. (...) Tutaj to się zaczyna. Dziesięć, piętnaście lat później kończy na wrakowiskach w Albanii, Turcji albo Czarnogórze."^{xxiii}
(‘Actually the whole city belongs to Mercedes. (...) Here it starts. Ten, fifteen years later it ends on a car dump in Albania, Turkey or Montenegro.’)

Concerning Eastern Europe, Russia is more or less excluded from Stasiuk's works, his world stops at the Ukrainian-Russian border at the latest. As has been shown above, the narrator is relieved when he notices that his personal map of Central Europe does not include parts of Germany or Russia. Eventually, Stasiuk's narrator eternally moves within the same, familiar space, which has already been identified as a circle of 300 km radius around his home village in the Carpathian Mountains. By doing so, he transgresses national borders, but the region he strides is relatively small and historically unencumbered. The much more problematic relationships with Russia is more or less left out, the descriptions of Germany are laden with stereotypes, for example about the country being cold at the core^{xxiv} and so well-organized that even Kazakhs were able to keep the parliament running.^{xxv} Szczepaniak^{xxvi} goes so far as to accuse Stasiuk of xenophobia after reading *Dojczland*. Although we should always see a twinkle of irony in his words, I agree that his rebellion against political correctness does not serve the case of an equal cooperation in Europe.

Central Europe is very often characterized by poverty and chaos, which is presented in a positive light though. For example, in the "Tales of Galicia", the losers of the political and economic changes after 1989 are at the centre of attention, mostly men who drink and do hard physical work to make ends meet for themselves and their families. It becomes obvious that Stasiuk has great interest in and great sympathy for people at the margin of society, such as Józek:

"Ostatni raz widziałem go latem. Drelichowe spodnie, podkoszulek i czarny beret. Skóra palona na brąz, a w ustach wiecznie tłący się pet. (...) Tydzień później już nie żył. (...) Kumpie opowiadali, że tego dnia nie było nic do picia. Ani krzty krajowego wina i piwa. W samo południe przegonił żaby ze stojącego bajorka i napił się wody. Podobno zabił go ten zdradliwy płyn. Gdy lekarze w szpitalu zajrzeli w jego ciało, stwierdzili, że wygląda na conajmniej sto lat."^{xxvii}
(‘For the last time I saw him in summer. Canvas trousers, a vest and a black beret. His skin burned to a bronze colour, and the eternally burning fag in his mouth. (...) A week later he was dead. (...) His mates said that there was nothing to drink that day. Not an ounce of domestic wine or beer. At noon he chased away the frogs from the standing puddle and drank some water. Probably this treacherous fluid killed him. When the doctors in hospital took a look into his body, they asserted that he looked like at least one hundred years old.’)

Although Central Europe and its people are often depicted, it is actually South Eastern Europe – most of all Romania and Albania – where Stasiuk's narrator feels really at home:

"Prawdziwa geografia to droga ucieczki, która wiedzie na południe, ponieważ wschód i zachód opanowały jej bękarcie siostry i moja głodna dusza niczego tam nie znajdzie. (...) Wschód to tylko antypody zachodu, jego zwierciadło (...)."^{xxviii}
(‘The only true geography is the path of escape, which leads South, because East and West controlled their bastard sisters and my hungry soul won’t find anything there. (...) The East is only the antipode of the West, its mirror (...).’)

Apart from South Eastern Europe, only one place is mentioned as a “bridge between East and West”, but this place is also related to the past and does not provide a perspective for the future – the former GDR:

“Bo NRD jednak powinno pozostać pomostem między Wschodem a Zachodem. Między Rzymem a Bizancjum. Tam rzeczywiście znajdowałem przyjaciół.”^{xxix}
(‘Actually the GDR should have stayed the bridge between East and West. Between Rome and Byzantium. There I have really made friends.’)

Last but not least, it has to be mentioned that the narrator hardly ever communicates with people, especially those who do not belong to his *mała ojczyzna* and is often very sketchy and merciless in his verdict, for example:

“Wielcy, tłuści Ruscy stoją z tymi swoimi złotymi łańcuchami i butami w szpic na pół metra. Sadło i gorzała. Stoją i patrzą, i wyobrażają sobie, że to wszystko jest ich.”^{xxx}
(‘Big, fat Russians are standing there with their gold chains and half-metre-long pointed shoes. Fat and booze. They are standing there and imagining that everything is theirs.’)

This perspective of the passive observer, this way of talking *about* each other instead of *with* each other, does not provide a new perspective for a cooperative future of Europe.

5. Conclusion

Andrzej Stasiuk’s works doubtlessly are of great poetical strength and are definitely worth reading because of their very special atmosphere, their multilayer characters at the margin of European society and for many other reasons. His individual, regional approach to Central Europe is certainly interesting and some of his metaphors offer a creative, new approach to what Europe is today and what it is not. However, on the whole, many old myths and stereotypes continue to exist in his works and one must come to the conclusion that Stasiuk hardly has any suggestions to offer how Europe could be integrated in the future, what is the common ground of Europeans and especially how the gaps between Eastern and Western Europe can be bridged. His view is rather critical and Euro-sceptical and focuses much more on the past than the future. By doing so, Stasiuk embodies the refusal of many post-1990 writers to act in the name of the nation and as a moral authority; instead, his style is very personal and not binding. That is why on the whole, Stasiuk’s texts do not offer pathbreaking new ideas for Europe and can therefore only be seen as a small step forward in the literary discourse about Europe. As a consequence, literature will have to carry on facing the question what it can (and what it wants to) contribute to Europe in the future.

ⁱ Szczepaniak, Monika (2013): „*On the road auf slawisch*. Figurationen des Aufbruchs in der Prosa von Andrzej Stasiuk.“ // Hoff, Dagmar von; Szczepaniak, Monika; Wetenkamp, Lena (eds.), *Poetiken des Auf- und Umbruchs*. Frankfurt am Main, p. 19.

ⁱⁱ Cf. also Marszałek, Magdalena (2010): „Anderes Europa. Zur (ost)mitteleuropäischen Geopoetik.“ // Marszałek, Magdalena; Sasse, Sylvia (eds.), *Geopoetiken. Geographische Entwürfe in den mittel- und osteuropäischen Literaturen*. Berlin, p. 61.

ⁱⁱⁱ Stasiuk, Andrzej (1995): *Opowieści galicyjskie*. Kraków, pp. 10-11.

^{iv} English translations: Anna-Maria Meyer.

^v Cf. e.g. Marszałek (2010).

^{vi} Stasiuk, Andrzej (2000): „Dziennik okrętowy.“ // Stasiuk, Andrzej; Andruchowycz, Jurij: *Moja Europa. Dwa eseje o Europie zwanej środkową*. Wołowiec, pp. 77-78.

^{vii} Cf. Rölfke, Stefanie (2007): „*Magie des Zerfalls*.“ // *Der geopoetische Kosmos des Andrzej Stasiuk*. Köln u.a.

^{viii} Stasiuk (2000), p. 125.

^{ix} Cf. Stasiuk, Andrzej (1997): *Dukla*. Gładyszów.

^x Cf. Stasiuk, Andrzej (2004): *Jadąc do Babadag*. Gładyszów.

^{xi} Cf. Stasiuk (1995).

^{xii} Koschmal, Walter (2005): „Europa mit der Seele suchen. Polen zwischen Mythen und Metaphern.“ // Göbler, Frank (ed.), *Polnische Literatur im europäischen Kontext. Festschrift für Brigitte Schulze zum 65. Geburtstag*. München (Arbeiten und Texte zur Slavistik 77), pp. 57–88.

^{xiii} Stasiuk, Andrzej (2000), p. 106.

^{xiv} Stasiuk (2000), pp. 113-114.

^{xv} Stasiuk (2000), p. 79.

^{xvi} Stasiuk (2000), p. 128.

^{xvii} Stasiuk, Andrzej (2007): *Dojczland*. Gładyszów, p. 92.

^{xviii} Stasiuk, Andrzej (2006): *Fado*. Gładyszów.

^{xix} Cf. Szczepaniak (2013), p. 24.

^{xx} Cf. also Marszałek (2010), p. 61.

^{xxi} Stasiuk (2007), p. 7.

^{xxii} Stasiuk (2007), p. 12.

^{xxiii} Stasiuk (2007), p. 11.

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- ^{xxiv} Cf. Stasiuk (2007), p. 15.
^{xxv} Cf. Stasiuk (2007), p. 53.
^{xxvi} Cf. Szczepaniak (2013), p. 19.
^{xxvii} Stasiuk (1995), p. 11.
^{xxviii} Stasiuk (2000), p. 120.
^{xxix} Stasiuk (2007), p. 57.
^{xxx} Stasiuk (2007), p. 13.

Bio-note

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