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THE QUESTION OF THE PROVINCE IN POLISH AND EAST GERMAN LITERATURE AND LITERARY STUDIES AFTER 1989¹

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Abstract: Emilia Kledzik, THE PROVINCE IN THE MOST RECENT POLISH AND GERMAN LITERATURE AND IN THE CONTEMPORARY POLISH AND GERMAN LITERARY CRITICISM. „PORÓWNANIA” 6, 2009, Vol. VI, pp. 149-164, ISSN 1733-165X. The article presents an analysis of the topos of the province in Polish and German literature after 1989. In spite of different historical and literary sources, the turning point of the fall of the Berlin wall marks the beginning of the surprising career of this literary figure which, according to the author, is connected to the postcolonial profile of the literatures after the breakthrough. The topos of province in literature studies and literary criticism has different functions: as an affirmation and source of national identity (the Polish “borderland” and German West Prussia) and a test of its anti-community, postmodern character (in Stasiuk and Tokarczuk’s works) and a tint of Western German quasi-identity. The proposed model for the understanding of the texts of the region is focused around the person of the narrator and the categories of the (anthropological) point of view.

Abstrakt: Emilia Kledzik: PROWINCJA W NAJNOWSZEJ LITERATURZE POLSKIEJ I NIEMIECKIEJ ORAZ WSPÓŁCZESNYCH POLONISTYCZNYCH I GERMANISTYCZNYCH BADANIACH LITERACKICH. „PORÓWNANIA” 6, 2009, Vol. VI, ss. 149-164, ISSN 1733-165X. Artykuł prezentuje analizę toposu prowincji w literaturze polskiej i niemieckiej powstałej po 1989 roku. Mimo odmiennych historycznoliterackich źródeł, cezura upadku muru berlińskiego wyznacza początek zaskakującej kariery tej figury literackiej, co, zdaniem autorki, ma związek z postkolonialnym profilem literatur po przełomie. Podobnie w badaniach literaturoznawczych i krytyce literackiej: topos prowincji występuje w różnych funkcjach: jako potwierdzenie i źródło tożsamości narodowej (polskie „kresy” i niemieckie Prusy Wschodnie) oraz próba jej antywspólnotowego, postmodernistycznego przełamania (w twórczości Stasiuka i Tokarczuk) oraz ładu quasi-tożsamości wschodniemieckiej. Postulowany model lektury tekstów dotyczących regionu koncentruje się wokół postaci narratora i kategorii (antropologicznego) punktu widzenia.

The province is a state of mind rather than a place on a map.

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The province as a spatial category, in opposition to the metropolitan centre, is an indispensable component of post-colonial theory. It would therefore be a cliché to write about it in geo-political terms; after all each colony is in reality a province of an empire and the post-colonial discourse is based on this and attendant dichotomies; literary studies constitute but a fraction of this discourse. The question I am going to analyse in this text is related to historical poetics and concerns the province as a subject matter of literary studies and its representation in selected literatures in the role of, to use a term by a Poznań-based scholar, “a trace of a breakthrough”³. I mean here the manner in which an image of new European dichotomies generated after the fall of the Berlin Wall emerges from East German and Polish literary texts through the portrait of the province.

What does the *topos* in question and post-colonial studies have in common? In analyses of Polish scholars describing native literature via the tools offered by this recently popular current of theoretical literary reflection, the question of a spatial organisation of the world depicted seems to play a major role. Literary works have often been scrutinised from this perspective also without the aid of post-colonial discourse, suffice it to mention the canonical collection of analyses edited by Michał Głowiński⁴, but I believe that the discourse in question proves useful first of all during a comparative study of the above literatures. The post-colonial categories allow a combination of elements of the collective identity discourse with a close analysis of a literary work, thereby demonstrating analogies imperceptible for other ways of reading. The phenomenon of the province – present in both the aforementioned sets of literary texts – becomes then the prism that combines elements of what has been earlier called “engaged” literature with its opposition, often stressed by scholars⁵, i.e. an attempt to reject anything collective. The frequency of its appearance in the period of literary history indicated gives us to understand that the popularity is linked to the breakthrough of 1989. The space of the province as a field of post-colonial research may, therefore, become a basis for reflection on the condition of post-Soviet societies, an all-encompassing tool of expressing an attitude towards political transformations in the perspective of past and “sensed”, imminent colonisation. In this text I will endeavour to prove that this feature is not really a result of the

³ P. Czaplinski, *Ślady przełomu. O prozie polskiej 1976–1996*. Kraków 1998.

⁴ *Przestrzeń i literatura: studia*. Red. M. Głowiński, A. Okopień-Sławińska. Warszawa 1978.

⁵ New engaged literature is analysed by K. Brakoniecki, who calls it “new social literature” and defines it as follows: “bridging divisions between high and low literature, engaged and non-committed”, it would be conducive to a new understanding of subjective (based on the poetics of an autobiographical confession) existential participatory literature”. K. Brakoniecki, *Prowincja człowieka: obraz Warmii i Mazur w literaturze olsztyńskiej*. Olsztyn 2003, p. 10.

rejection of community implied by literary scholars but rather often an attempt to stand up in its defence.

From the diachronic perspective the *topos* of the province has been implemented in a host of different ways and under a host of different circumstances in both the relevant literary histories. Its abundant history in the literature of the German language stems from the strong regionalisation of this language area and a low efficiency of a strong and centralised national discourse, both in Germany and in Austria. In turn, Lusatian Serbs for instance, as a Slavic national minority, are “doomed to the provincial”, which makes the image of the province constantly present in their literature and nearly invariably classically post-colonial. In Polish literature the career of the province seems to be a legacy of the once powerful current of landed gentry and inhabitants of rural areas, the tradition of Romanticism (the Polish province will be, then, unlike that in Germany or Lusitania, a place where national discourse is born) and the love of the rural during the Young Poland period. Mieczysław Dąbrowski, along with other scholars of geopoetics⁶ also known as literary geography⁷ or humanistic geography, observes that it still remains incomplete or deviated in the case of Polish writers. To him it arises “from a disillusion with or (...) an imagined longing for what it does not experience”⁸. This observation seems to apply, in fact, to the majority of writers celebrating the Place; as Joseph Roth would have it: “Genuine literary provinces are lost provinces”.⁹ Therefore, observes Dąbrowski, rarely do Polish texts let the inhabitant of the province speak in their own right. Let us add that in general this occurs very infrequently, which may also stem from the post-colonial nature of the very category¹⁰. In post-Soviet literature the phenomenon of the province additionally coincides with the decline of the communist-era centralisation and with the recognition of cultural diversity in what was previously supposed to remain a

⁶ “Geo-poetics is to serve the analysis and combination in the artistic and cultural process of local cultures, distant geographical and spiritual places with a view to developing a succinct philosophy of symbiosis with the world.” K. Brakoniecki, op. cit., p. 43. E. Rybicka quotes K. White’s definition: “A study of intellectual and sensory experience between the human being and the Earth in order to come up with a harmonious cultural space. I asked myself what subject could be fundamental to our world today? It seemed obvious that it is our attitude to planet Earth. Ecology? Yes, but not exclusively. The thing is not only to conserve natural spaces but to pin down contact and relation and express it: the question of expression (language) is fundamental. All of this directs us to poetry, to poetics (...). K. White, *Atlantica. Wiersze i rozmowy*. Transl. and selection K. Brakoniecki. Olsztyn 1998, p. 21, 22, quoted after: E. Rybicka, *Geopoetyka. O mieście, przestrzeni i miejscu we współczesnych teoriach i praktykach kulturowych*, in: *Kulturowa teoria literatury. Główne pojęcia i problemy*. Red. M.P. Markowski, R. Nycz. Kraków 2006, p. 479.

⁷ K. Brakoniecki, op. cit., p. 42.

⁸ M. Dąbrowski, in: *Metropole – Provinz. Urbanität und Ruralität in den slavischen Sprachen, Literaturen und Kulturen*. Red. T. Bruns, G. Ressel. Trier 2008, p. 37. At present the literature I am interested in is typically defined as “local literature”, “regional literature” or the “literature of magic places”.

⁹ Quoted after K. Brakoniecki, op. cit., p. 39

¹⁰ Ibidem.

monolith¹¹. Jacek Kolbuszewski aptly points out that all attempts at launching artistic regional initiatives under communism were invariably doomed to failure:

Writing literature, which was to be a tool of spontaneous expression of people tied with their ‘small homeland’ became artificially manhandled as a predictable state cultural policy that created superimposed values¹².

Another literary scholar points out the ease of travelling related to globalisation processes and the attendant popularity of “topographic literature”, where space itself is a protagonist¹³. In Polish literature this discovery of the region will be connected also with the discussion of topics that had previously been dealt with nostalgically and exclusively by émigré literature: the settling of old scores between Poles and Germans, Poles and Ukrainians, Poles and Jews, displacements, deportations, and local conflicts.

Even more puzzling in the face of the vast diversity of these traditions is the popularity of images of the province in literary texts written after the fall of the iron curtain in Poland and Eastern Germany. To my mind, the causes of this coincidence are post-colonial in their essence and are rooted in the conviction of being a “worse” Europe, which is characteristic of this part of the Old Continent and which was augmented by the post-Soviet experience. Central Europe is seen as a place where history takes place “over the heads” and at the expense of the indigenous population. One excerpt that is a perfect illustration of this conviction appears in an essay by Andrzej Stasiuk from the book *Moja Europa. Dwa eseje o Europie zwanej Środkową* [My Europe: Two essays on the place called Central Europe]:

I (...) the child of the lowlands of Mazovia, felt a continuous draft, a continuous Zug moving from East to West and back. At times it had the appearance of an ordinary wind, on other occasions it assumed the form of an open, unbounded chasm, only to ultimately take the shape of a wind of history of a surprising course: this way or that way, but invariably here¹⁴.

The contemporary province in this European region may be defined not only through its lying in Central Europe but first and foremost through the local. Its uniqueness (non-literary yet fitting the post-colonial key) is described by Kazimierz Brakoniecki, who writes about North-Eastern Poland:

¹¹ See Z. Rykiel, *Typologia ruchów regionalnych w Polsce*, in: *Region, regionalizm – pojęcia i rzeczywistość. Zbiór studiów*. Red. K. Handke. Warszawa 1993, p. 87.

¹² J. Kolbuszewski, *Literackie oblicza regionalizmu*, in: *Region, regionalizm....* Red. K. Handke..., op. cit., p. 187.

¹³ E. Rybicka, op. cit., p. 485.

¹⁴ A. Stasiuk, J. Andruchowycz, *Moja Europa. Dwa eseje o Europie zwanej Środkową*. Wołowiec 2001, p. 80.

Warmia and Masuria remained the poorest regions in Poland, with the highest unemployment rate, with a plebeian and lower middle-class inactive electorate who demand a lot from the authorities. They suffer from a sickness called a loss of hope in a better future (e.g. a better education for the children) and have an oligarchic authority (irrespective of party origin). This is an isolated region, which even though applauded – not only by communist-era writers – as a hunter's and angler's paradise, warmly eulogised in brilliant poems and lyrics of holiday songs about sailing (from Gałczyński through Osiecka) is not a good and close homeland for the most determined and the most ambitious young people who seek a better future in Warsaw, Poznań or Berlin¹⁵.

Brakoniecki demands, then, the “demythologisation” of this space and a shift from the “narcissistic and nostalgic tone to that of existential responsibility”¹⁶.

Reflections on the literary province should be preceded by observations on contemporary research dedicated to space in literary texts, which are impossible here for lack of space. Let me only stress that when writing about it I will apply the categories put forth by Michał Głowiński in his work on the symbolic order of space. It will therefore be particular, enclosed, clearly outlined and delineated by borders superimposed by the classic opposition between the centre and the peripheries¹⁷. It moreover should be linked with furnishing landscape with mental features, a legacy of Romanticism: Homi Bhabha proves that the self-reflection inherent in the text and the attitude to the real is in fact a function of the visual¹⁸. This is the transition from the so-called external reality to the narrator's projection. Elżbieta Rybicka defines the process as follows:

Literary landscapes, as a combination of literature and landscape, are social constructs since human ideologies and beliefs both influence them and are themselves influenced. As a consequence, literature and geography are no longer two separate modes of knowledge, the imaginary and the factographic, since in line with post-modern logic and as in the case of anthropology a process of the “literaturisation” of geography took place and a parallel process of the “worldliness” of literature, or its linkage with the real¹⁹.

Protagonists of literary texts will then live in and describe (irrespective of their origin, of which later) places that are: less urbanised, less densely populated, more exotic, or dominated by “nature” to a larger extent than urban space, invariably a reference point, which recurs in their memories or is demonstrated as the story evolves. This is reflected in concrete descriptions of nature, which in one way or another dominates over civilisation: texts abound in images of dilapidated (symbolic, post-communist, post-fascist) buildings conquered by the

¹⁵ K. Brakoniecki, op. cit., p. 8.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 11.

¹⁷ See M. Głowiński, *Przestrzenne tematy i wariacje*. In: idem, *Poetyka i okolice*. Warszawa 1992, p. 200.

¹⁸ H. Bhabha, *DyssemiNacja. Czas, narracja i marginesy współczesnego narodu*. Transl. T. Dobrogoszcz. „Literatura na Świecie” 2008, No. 1/2, p. 202.

¹⁹ E. Rybicka, op. cit., p. 478.

natural element, or in portraits of communities gone “animal”, rejecting the norms of the “centre” for the sake of natural law. Obviously, we do not deal here with naïve mimetism but with the development of readers’ topographic recognition of what the province is and what region of Europe it should be linked to.

The opposition of the province and of urban space may be compared to the subject of study of imagology, a science that analyses cultural images of foreign communities, spaces and national identities. In this way the question under discussion has been invaded by the notion of the Other as a subject of description and related stereotypes (whose analysis is sometimes mistaken for post-colonial studies²⁰). According to Ortfried Schäffer an idealised position vis-à-vis the Other presupposes the ability to relativise one’s own position:

This involves a self-perception and a perception of one’s point of view as one of the many possibilities plus an attendant recognition that WHAT and HOW we ourselves see something as the Other depends mainly on our own history²¹.

Such an experience of the province, apparent especially in variations of travel novels is according to Manfred Schmeling, a field of experiment for *I*, for whom contact with the other becomes an impetus for changing, adopting a distance to oneself and defining one’s own identity²². It seems that this “educational” function of the province is close to Andrzej Stasiuk’s literature. The author’s protagonists and narrators from *Biały kruk* [White Raven], *Dukla* and *Opowieści galicyjskie* [Tales of Galicia] undergo a transformation in contact with the metaphysical space of the peripheries.

However, how can we define the province itself as a textual category? In Polish literary and cultural studies the notion occurs rarely and is replaced by terms such as peripheries, frontier land, “small homeland”, region, the local. Each of the above “imperfect synonyms” relates to a different interpretation and valorisation of this space. Incidentally, the division coincides with the manner of using the *topos* of the province in Polish contemporary literature; it may be a sign of nostalgia or a post-modern tool for the deconstruction of collective identities. The former case is connected with the literature of the so-called frontier land; on the one hand the province is a multicultural space and on the other an inherently Polish area, whose life and local specifics are based on the cycles of nature and are identified

²⁰ W. Bolecki, *Myśli różne o postkolonializmie. Wstęp do tekstów nienapisanych*. „Teksty Drugie” 2007, No. 4, p. 6-14.

²¹ O. Schäffer, *Das Fremde. Erfahrungsmöglichkeiten zwischen Faszination und Bedrohung*. Opladen 1991, p. 12.

²² M. Schmeling, *Nie będziesz czynił żadnego obrazu... Obcość kulturowa jako dziedziina badań literaturoznawstwa porównawczego*, in: *Narodowy i ponadnarodowy charakter literatury*. Red. M. Cieśla-Korytowska. Kraków 1996, p. 367.

with the social, spiritual and aesthetic harmony and the happy period of childhood. This is, then, the province *à la* Jean-Jacques Rousseau, one that allows the human being to return to the state of primeval bliss. A scientific analysis of this image is provided by Jan Kamiński in his collection titled *Metafizyka prowincji* [The metaphysics of the province], a set of essays and interviews with lovers of the Białystok area. Characteristically, one of the protagonists reverses the province-centre stereotype:

In turn, what the real city is today makes me feel like I am in a jungle every time I go there. In order to survive in a city I would need to acquire new ways of living, more primeval and more in line with life's simplest instincts²³.

The province seen in this way, as an idyllic place, is a handy tool in the discourse of the colonisers as it allows covering up discrimination, hidden beneath the category of memory, which even though used this way cannot officially claim to be objective and complete. The so-called “grand history” appearing in its background enhances the discourse which it seemingly deconstructs: the “small homeland” is the breeding ground of national identity not exclusively in the local dimension. This is illustrated perfectly well by German literature in the 1920s and 1930s, when the province as the sanctuary of “Germanness” became the favourite *topos* supporting the Nazi ideology of the *Blut und Boden*.

A second, seemingly different type of the local appearing in Polish literature is the “post-modern province”, whose function is to smash to pieces all the “grand” national narratives after the breakthrough. Synonymous with the “regional” and the “local”, it can be found, for instance, in the “frontier” prose by Olga Tokarczuk (*Dom dzienny, dom nocny* [House of Day, House of Night]) and Andrzej Stasiuk (*Dukla*). This trend would be on the one hand represented by those provinces that deconstruct national myths, and as a consequence promote the local in the spirit of the Europe of the Regions, and on the other hand by the realistically “engaged” images, such as e.g. Ewa Borzęcka’s documentary *Arizona*. The latter are often used as a backdrop of post-colonial narratives that show villages after the dissolution of huge communist collective farms (the world after the fall of an empire) or underprivileged, forgotten and demoralised communities of a new discourse of dominance and power: of “wild” capitalism that dooms human settlements and their residents to death.

In Polish literature the figure of the province is used, then, first of all by the interpreters of Andrzej Stasiuk’s or Olga Tokarczuk’s writing and for so-called “frontier land studies”. These studies, as was indicated above, prove especially susceptible to (post-)colonial

²³ J. Kamiński, *Metafizyka prowincji*. Białystok 2001, p. 41.

discourse²⁴. Separate attention should be paid to a volume of texts titled *Region i regionalizacja – pojęcia i rzeczywistość* [Region and regionalisation – nomenclature and reality], edited by Kwiryna Handke. The book scrutinises the relevant issue from the ethnological and anthropological perspective which is extremely useful for a post-colonial scholar. In the introduction to this volume of texts the editor herself refers to the old synonymy of notions such as “regionalisation” and “provincialism”:

The term regionalism, underpinned by the meaning of the fundamental word “region”, “area”, “a part of the whole (area)”, has become predominant. At the same time the analogous primary relation between the term provincialism and the fundamental word the province ceased to operate because of the shift in the significance potential of the term province (initially also an “area”, “a part of the whole (area)”, especially an “administrative unit”, today synonymous with subservience with respect to the centre, e.g. capital city – the province or the cultural province)²⁵.

The above fragment demonstrates the inherently axiological nature of the term “province”. The semantic shift demonstrates the interdependence which was previously disregarded in studies of regional literature, which try to enhance the status of peripheries with respect to the metropolis, perceived as a centre of a discourse inimical to local identity. So far, interestingly in literary studies only,²⁶ the existence of a local identity was stressed without indicating its inherently antagonistic and oppositional nature: the province is the antithesis of the centre and protects itself against misappropriation, against attempts to talk on its behalf and to strip it of autonomy. Only post-colonial studies demonstrated the complex tensions between the metropolis and the peripheries. As Elżbieta Rybicka observes: “[In post-colonial literature] the city is not an *agora* but rather a space of *agon*, or deep-seated cultural conflict”²⁷.

The most profound analysis of the *topos* of the province in the German language was carried out by a regional literary scholar Norbert Mecklenburg. According to him since Modernism discovered urban space, each literary demonstration of interest in the peripheries has been flawed and paradoxically “unnatural”. The province is an ideologically polysemous term, with such colloquial connotations as limited territory, distance from the centre and local

²⁴ See B. Bakula, *Kolonialne i postkolonialne aspekty polskiego dyskursu kresoznawczego*. „Teksty Drugie” 2006, nr 6, p. 11-33.

²⁵ K. Handke, *Przedmowa*, in: Eadem, op. cit., p. 19. In turn J. Kolbuszewski opts for the differentiation of both terms, seeing regionalism as a “social movement supposed to satisfy the aspirations of a given region (...) and to integrate it more efficiently with the state”, while provincialism stands for “attempts to bring out or artistically process certain local values in literature (art). See J. Kolbuszewski, op. cit., p. 187.

²⁶ See a statement by Z. Chojnicki: “On the one hand we see a rise in integration and removal of inter-state borders, and on the other there is an increase in separatist tendencies, nationalism and ethnical and cultural isolationism. This contributes to the rise to power of regional and local communities and their governance.” J. Kamiński, op. cit., p. 13.

²⁷ E. Rybicka, op. cit., p. 477.

specificity, marginality, backwardness, proximity of nature (the agrarian zone), dominance of images of fauna and flora, natural landscapes, etc. These features are reflected in the images of particular elements of the reality of life, mentality and value systems, merging aesthetic and sociological elements. Sets of oppositions defining the term of the province: city/countryside, civilisation/nature, centre/margin, complexity/simplicity, the total/the particular, unity/difference define a few “ideological paths” that guide our thinking about the province: anti-civilisation, romanticism, utopian socialism, (political) regionalism, ecological movements²⁸.

German Studies scholars draw attention to the rise to prominence of the nostalgic East Prussia, a trend observed also in Polish literature. The paradox lies in the fact that it is precisely the ideologically charged *Heimatroman* that appears in the next edition of the novel settling old scores, this time showing the German province as separated from the Nazi command centre, afflicted by the absurdity of the war, which destroys its harmony and idyll, a background for heroic stands and the tragedy of forced displacement. This is yet another proof that the nostalgic images of “small homelands”, transposing history from the level of “grand discourse” to the local, are a tool of resentment and xenophobia rather than of genuine reconciliation.

The other, opposite type of the province that emerges for instance from analyses by Wolfgang Engler (*Die Ostdeutschen. Kunde von einem verlorenen Land*)²⁹ and recurrent in the entire “East German literature”, is used to exemplify the de-colonisation and re-colonisation process experienced by residents of the former GDR after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Interestingly, the term “province” actually does not appear in this context in literary studies but features in titles of novels and critical literary discourse. Literary critics point out a distinguishing mark of East German novels about the province: they are examples of critical realism, reflect the real “as it (seemingly) is”, and do not attempt to mythologize or glamorise it, as opposed to the idyllic province of East Prussia. What, then, is conducive to identifying the former GDR with the province? This is first of all the relative hermetic nature of the East German national borders that guaranteed the creation of an enclosed space, with no contact with the “civilised” Western world. This is also the “exploited landscape” [*gebeutelte Landschaft*] of used coal mines or more or less superimposed and artificial East German identity, with its entire repertory of patterns of behaviour and stereotypes (e.g. apparent sexual

²⁸ N. Mecklenburg, *Erzählte Provinz. Regionalismus und Moderne im Roman*. Königsstein im Taunus 1986, p. 13 ff.

²⁹ W. Engler, *Die Ostdeutschen. Kunde von einem verlorenen Land*. Fourth edition. Berlin 2004.

liberalism reflected by a larger number of nude beaches)³⁰. An example here is Ingo Schulze's famous novel *Simple Storys. Geschichten aus einem versunkenen Land*, with Altenburg as the setting of the thirteen episodes from the lives of residents of the former GDR. This city itself was colonised by the Soviets in the mid-1950s (because of a nearby uranium mine) and re-colonised by Western Germans after the disappearance of the iron curtain. The inhabitants of a provincial town arrived here years ago, re-settled like the protagonists of a story by Andrzej Stasiuk; the reality around them changes again before their very eyes, without asking their permission. The reunification of Germany is regarded by some historians as a process of "incapacitating" the former GDR, also often referred to as "colonisation". According to the authors of the volume *Kolonisierung der DDR* who explained the provocative title of the publication, colonisation should be seen as the "political, economic and cultural dominance of one social system over another"³¹. The former GDR is then the breeding ground for a classically post-colonial "hybrid identity" taken from Homi Bhabha's theories. This identity is revealed in the frontier territories of a national society in the disturbed perspective of the speaking subject: the subject is simultaneously within and outside discourse. This can be seen for instance in the figure of "the other" in Wolfgang Hilbig's novel – an "Ossi" who travels incessantly between the German East and West in search of his own identity, regarding himself from an "outside". The figure does not follow the simple paradigm of the "master" and the "slave" dominant in the colonial discourse of the GDR after 1989. The description is intensified by the quotations of "other voices", positioning the speaking protagonist both as "himself" (within the framework of "East German identity") and "another" (a "wild" arrival from the East), thus deconstructing both these terms in the process of identity development.

Since the province, as Mecklenburg defines it, is a space with a lower semantic density, it can be easily mythologised and is a background for an individual experience of the sacred. It is hardly a coincidence it seems that the images of the province often contain places of religious worship (not necessarily Christian) inscribed in the "natural" landscape. This is what happens in Stasiuk's *Opowieście galicyjskie* and in Zbigniew Benedyktowicz's analysis of Andrei Tarkovsky's movie *Nostalgia*³². Especially noteworthy is a fragment of an interview with the director quoted by the critic, where Tarkovsky claims that an image where a village cottage is literally inscribed into the ruins of a twelfth-century church has no symbolic significance. The importance of a symbol in provincial space is totally different

³⁰ Ibidem.

³¹ *Kolonialisierung der DDR. Kritische Analysen und Alternativen des Einigungsprozesses*. W. Dümcke, F. Vilmar (Hrsg.). Münster 1996, p. 8.

³² Z. Benedyktowicz, *O prowincji*. "Konteksty" 2008, No. 2, p. 37.

from that in the “traditional” narrative space: contact with a natural element “sanctifies” nearly each object and transforms it into a symbol, a merger of two parts that were previously separated. Tarkovsky observes that in trying to reflect the province on film tape he followed the primacy of absolute truthfulness: “However, when the screen moves a viewer closer to the actual world, it allows its full observation, conveys its smell and allows us to sense its humidity and dryness through the skin. Then it occurs that the viewers have already irretrievably lost their capacity of a direct and emotional experience of such sensations”³³. In fact the literary province is more synesthetic and poses as absolutely authentic; its anti-aesthetic bent makes it appear to the reader as “truer” than the urban environment. The province is a “pure material”; it is to express an aesthetic message, is more handy than urban space as it is semiotically empty; this is the birth of what Mecklenburg calls an “objectively erroneous”³⁴ *tabula rasa* effect.

Because of the aforementioned “lower semantic density” of the province, also its history can be easily susceptible to colonial tampering; it is easier to write a history of a place that is stereotypically “ahistoric” and empty than of a robust, dynamic and fluid space of a metropolis. “Colonialism moreover claims the past of the conquered people, warps it, twists and annihilates”, wrote Franz Fanon³⁵. The narrator who observes the world described from an ironic distance or familiar proximity, who gives voice to the residents of the peripheries or speaks on their behalf is the instance who will determine the colonial or post-colonial development of the literary province. A case in point is the image of the province in Andrzej Stasiuk’s *Opowieści galicyjskie*. Throughout the book we can identify traces of the narrator’s distance to the literary world and its protagonists. The only kind feelings the teller has are for nature. What is more, the community of a Galician village is consistently **stripped of history** by the narrator. These are displaced persons and thus, according to him, oddly enough, have no common narrative that might be the cornerstone of collective identity, which as a consequence becomes the cause of their degeneration, bestiality and moral decline. After all, according to post-colonial critics, identity is a product which is based not so much on “archaeology” but rather on “re-telling” the past³⁶. The narrator meticulously writes on their behalf the history of the place they found themselves in, totally accidentally. The most telling fragment that reveals the narrator’s propensity for filling out “empty spots” on a memory map

³³ Ibidem.

³⁴ N. Mecklenburg, *Die grünen Inseln. Zur Kritik des literarischen Heimatkomplexes*. München 1987, p. 10.

³⁵ F. Fanon, *O kulturze narodowej*, in: *Wyklęty lud ziemi*. Transl. H. Tygielska. Warszawa 1985, p. 143.

³⁶ See S. Hall, *Tożsamość kulturowa a diaspora*. Transl. K. Major. „Literatura na Świecie” 2008, No. 1/2, p. 167.

of the province is the section titled *Cerkiew* [The Church], dedicated to a phantasm of a no longer existent church that emerges in the speaker's imagination. Literary critics often cited this fragment as an example of creating a private history of the local, overlooking the very significant fact that nowhere in *Opowieści galicyjskie* does the first-person narrator get rid of his ironic attitude to the space described or to its rural inhabitants.

Something different takes place in a story by the East German writer Wolfgang Hilbig entitled *Alte Abdeckerei*³⁷. A child wandering on the outskirts of East German towns does not attempt to evaluate the territory described and remains its "naïve" and thus possibly objective spectator. The historical palimpsestic nature of the province remains a puzzle that the reader may or may not solve. This does not belittle the charm and value of Hilbig's literary vision as its sense lies not only in the presentation of provincial pathologies but of a space where history rubs shoulders with the natural element, is entwined, dominated and subdued by it.

Key to the description of the literary province is the category of the point of view; this space is often the "observation point" or a "place observed" by supplying and receiving instances. As the above textual category was adapted for the sake of literary studies from such disciplines as cultural studies or ethnology, analysis of speaking subjects calls for taking into account the recently popular anthropological element, which allows us to divide space into "tamed" and "foreign" (to the subject) as well as "central" and "peripheral" (provincial). Manfred Schmeling writes as follows:

The error of narration studies shared also by the most recent analyses consists in considering the question of perspective first of all as a technical narrative measure. Yet it is precisely perspective that may express a certain world view, a *vision du monde*³⁸.

Therefore when analysing texts about Central European peripheries we need to take into account who the narrator is and who they are addressing³⁹: does the narrator identify with the space described and give it voice, or do they try to speak "on behalf of the local community", subjugating it to themselves colonially. At this point colonial language is often used in literary critical discourse, an example being a text by Rüdiger Bernhardt, "Litauische Geschichten – *Inhaltsangabe oder Gattungsbezeichnung?*" from the publication in German

³⁷ W. Hilbig, *Alte Abdeckerei. Erzählung*. Frankfurt am Main 1991.

³⁸ M. Schmeling, op. cit., p. 368.

³⁹ See M. Czermińska, *Punkt widzenia jako kategoria antropologiczna i narracyjna w prozie niefikcyjnej*, „Teksty Drugie” 2003, nr 2/3, p. 12. Studies on the notion of *focus* as an "anthropological" category are also conducted by A. Łebkowska, *Pojęcie focus w narratologii – problemy i inspiracje*, in: *Punkt widzenia w tekście i dyskursie*. Red. J. Bartmiński. Lublin 2004, p. 219-238.

*Provinz als Zentrum*⁴⁰. The article furnishes an analysis of the so-called “figural province”, which is the focal point of the principal factors of life of a given community. The author believes that the popularity of the literature on German Eastern lands written in the first decades of the 20th c. and thriving since the transformation period of 1989 (e.g. texts by Ernst Wichert, Johannes Bobrowski and Hermann Sudermann) bore fruit with a new generic pattern. The plot of these novels takes place in venues that for whole decades were repressed from German collective memory (East Prussia), represented as a nostalgic place confronted with the technicised image of a city, a place in many respects distant from the present time and resistant to urbanisation, one that worships physical labour (as an ennobling form of countering the natural elements) and ethical impeccability. The principal characteristic of the Lithuanian province is its perennial and indestructible naturalness related to both the environment and the social zone: the Lithuanian indigenous population stick to their “pagan” traditions, as Bernhardt calls them, which strengthens their resistance to the Prussian authorities. The political element is by no means the only one that the residents of the region have to struggle with: interestingly enough, according to the scholar, evil in the novels set in the province of East Prussia is personified by a demoniacal woman and, secondly, by the temptations connected with the gradual merger of the urban and provincial element. Not all the analysed examples of literary narrators take the position of observers of “foreignness” who invoke local stories and describe traditional rituals, and thus represent the “civilised” world of the metropolis. Sudermann’s narrator is usually “a man from the people”, prone to use local dialect and Lithuanian lexis. The narrative is “wobbly” and everything takes place as if before the recipients’ eyes, while the one who tells the story evaluates the characters: “The narrator constantly judges his protagonists as if they were his family members, as if he lived among them and was responsible for them”⁴¹. Bernhardt notices here traces of the oral element (repetition of information, a number of the narrator’s comments conditioned by the need to capture the listeners’ undivided attention), which may be seen however as a repetition of the stereotypes about the “uncivilised” regions of the country, the peripheries. In fact, from the point of view of supplying and receiving instances in the literary text, we cannot simply identify Sudermann-the author and his beliefs with the expressiveness of his storyteller as this is rather a projection of the author’s assumptions of how a “simple” resident of the province

⁴⁰ *Provinz als Zentrum. Regionalität in Literatur und Sprache. Ein polnisch-deutsch-nordisches Symposium*. Red. D. Albrecht, A. Degen, B. Neumann, A. Talarczyk. Aachen 2007. See the review in: “Porównania” 2008, nr 5, p. 230-238.

⁴¹ R. Bernhardt, *Litauische Geschichten – Inhaltsangabe oder Gattungsbezeichnung?*. In: *Provinz als Zentrum*, op. cit., p. 67.

of East Prussia might speak, and thus it is an attempt at appropriating his language. On another occasion Bernhardt admits that Sudermann's narrator differs from Flaubert's or Stendhal's storytellers, so much admired by his author: he belongs to the represented world and does not hide its involvement with it. Another note: was Sudermann aware of the existence of the "Lithuanian national identity"? We may have doubts, especially after reading the article dedicated to Sudermann's *Litauische Geschichten*: Bernhardt believes them to be an examples of a "reconciliation of two nations, which supplements an urban lifestyle with rural naturalness"⁴². The scholar emphasises that "naturalness" has a generic feature in the case of the above set of texts: the *Geschichte* is a reference to the folk, oral origins of the stories and he mentions at the same time that these are in fact "German histories about the Lithuanians, Poles, Jews, Germans, and Russians who write a multinational history"⁴³. "Lithuanianness" is to be a synonym of "naturalness" allegedly "free from the ideological burden"⁴⁴, a "symbol of a symbiotic relation between people and landscape conducive to a conflict-free atmosphere"⁴⁵. As Bogusław Bakula indicated⁴⁶, the example of so-called Polish literature of the frontier land calls for scepticism with respect to a metropolitan narrative which glorifies the (ideologically, economically and socially) subordinated peripheries. Such an approach to the "less civilised" part of Europe is on the one hand idealising like the entire so-called Eastern Prussian literature but on the other hand dooms it to perennial "backwardness", stressing its allegedly "more natural" values of living amidst nature at its own pace, far from the decision-making centre of the world. If we add here the element of settling old scores with history – as if historical antagonisms grew softer in an idyllic climate – we get a classical colonial narrative additionally supported by similarly inclined literature. The scholar does not see the histories quoted by him as told by "someone", a representative of the outside world who may actually go into rapture, but it is invariably linked to his own origins.

The postcolonial aspect of the Central European province is not, however, its most evident feature. Appeals of Polish enthusiasts of post-colonialism to adapt a theory derived from the Third World to the Second World remain, with the exclusion of theoretical and critical discourse, largely unnoticed; Dariusz Skórczewski is right when he justifies this

⁴² Ibidem, p. 77-78.

⁴³ Ibidem.

⁴⁴ Ibidem.

⁴⁵ Ibidem.

⁴⁶ B. Bakula, op. cit.

situation by the poor knowledge of the postcolonial theory among Polish literary scholars⁴⁷, even though more important in this respect may be a general aversion to “socially engaged” literature after the breakthrough. We are familiar with the situation from the early 1990s when demands of literary criticism aspired to outdo the achievements of men and women of letters themselves; as a consequence it was disputable whether a literary reality was created by art or its commentators. These projects unanimously declared that the lower the “engagement”, the better the literature. In the 1990s post-colonialism could not possibly take root in the soil of Polish literary criticism as at that time it was fertilised by categories remotely distant from the manner of an artistic commentary on reality which was associated with Marxism.

Today, after Structuralism and Deconstruction, but still using their methods of an axiological “dismounting” of the text, when we again start to expect that literature will address major social issues, not degrading to the level of cheap journalism, the province category is now undergoing its modest renaissance. Firstly, through the integration with so-called Old Europe, of which we feel a worse and less attractive sister. Secondly, because of the legacy of the past, which converted Central Europe into a province of the Soviet Union. Thirdly, within Central European discourse we can identify centres and the peripheries they colonise. The first two perspectives of the provincial are perfectly merged and illustrated in Piotr Siemion’s novel *Niskie łąki* [Low meadows], where we find both (as Paweł Dunin-Wąsowicz observes) the only description in contemporary Polish literature of the Soviet army leaving and the bleak landscape of the East European province seen by an Englishman, a citizen of a “better” world, a new centre of cultural colonisation⁴⁸. The landscape gets transformed with the change of the political system (prior to 1989 the world depicted in literature is dominated by shades of grey, squalor and dimmed light; after the breakthrough Wrocław is full of varicoloured billboards), but these are in fact two divergent images of the province: one is a murky, foreign and unfriendly space while the other is the quintessence of kitsch. The same kitsch often appears in Andrzej Stasiuk’s texts, e.g. as a kiosk with all kinds of items in the marketplace in Dukla or the TV screens of inhabitants of the Lower Beskid Mountains flickering with commercials. However, the Olsztyn-based novel by Mariusz Sieniewicz *Czwarte niebo* [The fourth heaven] or *Nic* [Nothing] by Dawid Bieńkowski evidently stress the *topos* of the province as the bulwark of traditional values led astray by the temptations of globalisation and capitalism. What is implied is that a world which has just

⁴⁷ D. Skórczewski, *Wobec eurocentryzmu, dekolonizacji i postmodernizmu. O niektórych problemach teorii postkolonialnej i jej polskich perspektywach*. „Teksty Drugie” 2008, nr. 1/2, p. 33-55.

⁴⁸ P. Siemion, *Niskie łąki*. Warszawa 2002.

emerged on the cultural map of Europe is already fast disappearing, subdued by the unifying discourse of pop culture, money worship and a lack of respect for human dignity.

The afore-defined ambivalence of the province, which can be both a nationalist stronghold and an embryo of counter-culture and subversiveness, is to my mind related to the fundamental dilemmas of post-colonialism. Skórczewski writes about them when considering the question of nomenclature: is post-colonialism semantically identical with post colonialism?⁴⁹ Also Fajfer-Duć refers to them when stating that the biggest paradox of the post-colonial is the longing for a black-and-white world resembling that from before the post-colonial breakthrough⁵⁰. A similar thing takes place in the case of the province: while it is quintessentially hybrid itself, it will invariably move towards unification and uniformisation; while it is responsible for a rift in simple oppositions, its existence is contingent on a series of them.

Transl. Marcin Turski

⁴⁹ D. Skórczewski, op. cit.

⁵⁰ H. Duć-Fajfer, *Etniczność a literatura*, in: *Kulturowa teoria literatury*, op. cit., p. 446.