

*Gente Ruthenus, Nazione Polonus,*¹ or: Alienation in the Center: On the Poetry of Tkaczyszyn-Dycki

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Gente Ruthenus, nazione Polonus – this identity-generating expression invoked in a poem by Eugeniusz Tkaczyszyn-Dycki manages to capture issues tied to the poet’s Ukrainian-Polish identity.² The borderland, defined here as a specific set of social conditions and “autobiographical site” (Czermińska’s phrase) functioning within the world of the poetic narration, yet referencing

¹ This article was written under the auspices of the research project “Ecopoetics of historical catastrophes and conflicts in Polish literature of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: a comparative perspective,” financed by the National Program for the Advancement of the Humanities, by decree no. 0056/NPRH4/H2a/83/2016.

² E. Tkaczyszyn-Dycki, *XCII. Gente Ruthenus, nazione Polonus*, [in:] idem, *Oddam wiersze w dobre ręce*, Wrocław 2010, p. 115.

actual topographical space and equipped with “its own cultural symbolism,” becomes a recurring theme in subsequent poems.³ Wólka Krowicka and its environs are portrayed, on the one hand, as an “idyllic region” that has been irreversibly lost, where the Polish language mingles with Podlachian, and Orthodox and Catholic churches stand side by side. On the other hand, this territory bears the imprint of conflict as conveyed through accounts of forced resettlements, persecution, brutal murders, and the “Wisła” action.⁴ The poet’s family’s particular geopolitical position left them vulnerable to colonial oppression (from the West and East alike), which entailed the dehistoricization and naturalization of the experience of the Other, and the destructions of communities and their cultures. Surely, this is also why the primary organizing theme for his creative work became the “ritual of salvaging from oblivion” and the search for a chance at emancipation from under the yoke of symbolic violence.⁵

The mechanism of memory enables the reproduction of historical transformations. In the process, religious sites that are integral elements of the borderland as

³ M. Czerwińska, *Miejsce autobiograficzne. Propozycja w ramach geopoetyki*, “Teksty Drugie” 5/2011, p. 183.

⁴ In a footnote to his cycle of seven poems sharing the title “Nest” (Gniazdo), Tkaczyszyn-Dycki includes commentary on the experience of his own family. He explains that all members of his family on his mother’s side belonged to the UPA. After the “Wisła” action, they were deported, but by converting from the Uniate Church (unicki) to Roman Catholic, they were given permission to return to Lubaczów. See: E. Tkaczyszyn-Dycki, *Przypis m.in. do cyklu siedmiu wierszy pod tytułem “Gniazdo,”* [in:] idem, *Imię i znamię*, Wrocław 2012, p. 56.

⁵ M. Zaleski, *Formy pamięci: o przedstawieniu przeszłości w polskiej literaturze współczesnej*, Gdańsk 2004, p. 28.

a multicultural topography are converted into buildings for public use. By Tkaczyszyn-Dycki's account, the orthodox church in Krowica Hołodowska was converted into a storehouse for artificial fertilizers, whereas the synagogue located in Wielkie Oczy became an egg market. Yet it is only on the level of appearances that these religious buildings lose their sacral dimension when they are profaned by colonial authorities. By referencing this theme in the body of the poem, Tkaczyszyn-Dycki restores the sacred element that had been violated, and in doing so, he preserves the memory of the buildings' original function. When religious sites undergo these transformations, a specific form of continuity between situated spheres is projected, which tends to place the original and the superimposed in conflict, doing away with such divisions and generating a kind of superposition that we might call, after Haraway, an assemblage of "natureculture." Stones, as the only material traces that remain of these religious buildings, become historical anti-morphemes that retain the memory of the past. As the poet has written, he who "is in need of inspiration must look beyond the stones themselves and read their illegible inscriptions."⁶ In this way, the poem constantly circles back to the original status of the building materials used for new structures built from the ruins of Orthodox churches and cemetery gravestones.

When historical towns are devastated, their proper names are erased from the pages of history to expedite

⁶ E. Tkaczyszyn-Dycki, CCLXXIV, [in:] idem, *Oddam wiersze...*, p. 416.

a process that we might call, after Bhabba, “the strategic disavowal of cultural/historical difference.”⁷ The denigration of the past is counteracted by “the articul[at]ion of] the archaic”⁸, revealed by the poem’s allusions to residues of various kinds, and its despairing attempt to incorporate the cinders of the (im)material traces of human remains, of which “no trace had remained.”⁹ These particular topographies might qualify as what Roma Sendyka has called: “non-sites of memory,” a designation originally used to describe the locations of genocidal acts that are preserved solely in the memories of living witnesses and have not been commemorated through ritual burial or inscriptions on lasting material (monuments, museums, gravestones).¹⁰ It is often the case that local communities have no relationship with the victims, whose ethnic background usually sets them apart from the social majority. One common feature shared among these sites is the commingling of animal, human and vegetal remains alongside the ruins of old and new buildings. The landscape left behind by the devastation of religious buildings, demolition of cemeteries, and sites of violence creates “a rupture in its typical and habituated structure,” evoking anxiety and a desire to

⁷ H.K. Bhabba, *The Location of Culture*, Oxon-New York, 2004, p. 117.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 416.

¹⁰ Sendyka points out that the term “non-sites of memory” draws from the writing of Claude Lanzmann, who was in turn inspired by Pierre Nora but polemicized the latter’s definition. By its original logic, “memory sites” are a cultural practice that purports to materialize and preserve collective memory. By tacking the word “non” onto Noa’s term, the director of the film *Shoah* is drawing attention to the existence of sites bound up with trauma that resist the process of memory. See: P. Nora, *Między pamięcią a historią: les lieux de memoire*, trans. M. Borowski, M. Sugiera, “Didaskalia” 10/2011; R. Sendyka, *Pryzma – zrozumieć nie-miejsce pamięci (non-lieux de mémoire)*, “Teksty Drugie” 1-2/2013.

forget the past.¹¹ Writing of these spaces where “fields and wastelands spread today,” Tkaczyszyn-Dycki gropes at a memorializing gesture that is articulated clearly in the Miłosz-esque warning: “the poet remembers.” By this gesture, Tkaczyszyn-Dycki turns the space of the poem into a memorial space reserved for articulating that which is (not) present. The non-present appears in the form of remnants of ephemeral material tasked with preserving the history of a community in the wake of catastrophe – a history expressed in the wish: “may the snow, pure and white as a dream dreamt on a prisoner’s cot, preserve our names.”¹² This figure enacts the gesture of writing an anti-history that runs counter to the falsification of the past and the glossing over of inconvenient events or, to paraphrase the title of a novel by Włodzimierz Odojewski, “inundating everything, sweeping everything away,’ concealing the traces of one’s crimes. A veil of snow blanketing the earth cannot wipe away the blood that has been spilled there. It cannot bring this kind of cleansing, though it may set a certain process into motion, redirecting the narrative to the theme of historical turmoil and clearing a path back to that which was displaced. In this collective creation of memory, atmospheric phenomena and vegetation also loom large in Tkaczyszyn-Dycki’s poetry, where they

¹¹ R. Sendyka, op. cit., p. 326.

¹² E. Tkaczyszyn-Dycki, XV. *Zamieć*, [in:] idem, *Imię i znamię*, p. 19.

function as fully-fledged witnesses of history that reveal the “agency of nature.”¹³

Tkaczyszyn-Dycki, who wrote *Norwid’s Lover (Kochanka Norwida)*, calls on his reader to author a counter-narrative by listening closely to “the past within the wind / that will never free us from our memories.” In this way, he suggests that adopting this trope might lead to a deeper understanding of Poland’s geopolitical position.¹⁴ By associating the aforementioned atmospheric phenomena with the performative figure of a festering wound, he exposes the fear of a repeated assault by the Russians, and, in so doing, foregrounds the enormity of historical turmoil and reveals that the knowledge of humans as a species¹⁵ is “just one of many elements of a general history of life.”¹⁶

*tomorrow the Russians are coming
Hryniawska sees them once again
trampling their garden, which is to say, Poland
and the tulips all wilt in one stroke.*¹⁷

The passage cited here binds the natural sphere to the political one, conceived in terms of Agamben’s coupling of bios/zoe, thus foregrounding the uniform fates of all

¹³ R.C. Foltz, *Czy przyroda jest sprawcza w znaczeniu historycznym? Historia świata, historia środowiska oraz to, w jaki sposób historycy mogą pomóc ocalić ziemię*, [in:] E. Domańska (ed.), *Teoria wiedzy o przeszłości na tle współczesnej humanistyki*, Poznań 2009.

¹⁴ E. Tkaczyszyn-Dycki, CLXXVI, [in:] idem, *Oddam wiersze...*, p. 207.

¹⁵ C. Dipesh, *The Climate of History: Four Theses*, [in] “Critical Inquiry” 2/2009, pp. 197-222.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

¹⁷ E. Tkaczyszyn-Dycki, CLXXV, [in:] idem, *Oddam wiersze...*, p. 206.

things in the face of catastrophe. Catastrophe brings about the annihilation of what Haraway might call “companion species,” forcing us to reconceive the relationships that bind these species together.¹⁸ The metonymic string of the garden – Poland – tulip – (a Polish woman?) suggests ontological divisions between creatures, laying the groundwork for a de-centered image of a world in decay. The formation of Latour’s collective-without-outside generates a comprehensive model for writing the experience of genocide in a mode that embraces all forms of existence.¹⁹ In light of these notions, Tkaczyszyn-Dycki’s usage of the plant trope and its connotations of vitality and vibrancy, as well as femininity, poetry and beauty seems particularly resonant. The ridged, triangular structure of the flower conjures images of the female womb – the place where new things come into existence, a place associated with the exuberance of (un)impeded life, as it were, that rejects the opposition between the living and the dead. When Tkaczyszyn-Dycki uses the list as a device, he leaves much unsaid, and these omissions speak volumes. The poet foregrounds gender difference and tries to salvage from the obscurity of history traces of the suppressed feminine Other, whose experience “dwells within a shadow even more weighted” than the history of colonized man.²⁰ In his notes on Ukrainian and Polish kinship, we find references to the

¹⁸ See: D. Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*, Chicago 2003.

¹⁹ B. Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Science into Democracy*, trans. C. Porter, Cambridge 2004.

²⁰ G.C. Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, [in] *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. P. Williams and L. Chrisman, New York 1993, pp. 66-111.

poet's grandmother. The grandmother lived in Borowa Góra, where:

*She fed and supported
Ukrainian soldiers (though always
under cover of night) it must have
ended poorly for the wife and daughter
of the executioner.²¹*

In this way, the actual word “assault” (in Polish: *gwalt*, meaning both rape and violence)²² is omitted, and the action described is shrouded in mystery – it takes place under cover of night, suggesting a romantic scene that, despite all appearances, could not be further from romance. Borderland space is portrayed as a place where the respective spheres of gender politics chafe against one another to humiliate the enemy by violating their women.²³ In this poem, Tkaczyszyn-Dycki does not highlight the occupiers' affiliations with Ukraine, Poland, or Russia, although this particular threat is tied to anxieties about Russians, an anxiety that is necessarily bound up with the events of World War II.

Fear of oppression is intensified by the memory of Soviet soldiers and their aggressive assertion of hegemonic status, carried out through a campaign of material devastation and by diverting the “noble wind” (*jaśniepański wiatr*

²¹ E. Tkaczyszyn-Dycki, *VI. Placz*, [in:] idem, *Kochanka Norwida*, Wrocław 2014, p. 10.

²² Translator's Note.

²³ S. Agacinski, *Parity of the Sexes*, trans. L. Walsh, New York 1998, p. 161.

– a metaphor for superior airs) to “blow the other way.”²⁴ To compensate for their inferiority, the oppressed project a stereotypical image of the Ukrainian people according to which all representatives of this ethnic group have a “taste for the morbid” and backstories as murderers or thugs. This “colonial fantasy” (Bhabha’s phrase) encourages an attitude of aggression toward the Other, which in turn leads to the development of a “range of complexes” that have cascading repercussions for the self-image of the oppressed.²⁵ The vulnerability to threats from all sides ends up crystallizing subjectivity as defined by the “trauma of inferiority and produced by feelings of alienation from the universal.”²⁶ The absence of a universal system in Tkaczyszyn-Dycki’s poetry affirms his literary search for an adequate expressive mode. This is the salient theme of his collection *Imię i Znamię* (*Name and Signature*). The struggle with language – embodied in his adoption of words from conflicting systems ranging from the Podlachian dialect to standard Polish – ultimately leads the author to choose Polish as his proper tongue.

In the collection *Norwid’s Lover*, as I suggest above, the poet claims a mode of expression that evokes the figure of the romantic poet in exile. He articulates this decision in a confession slipped into the poem *In No Form Will I Give Myself To You*:

²⁴ E. Tkaczyszyn-Dycki, *Oddam wiersze...*, p. 207.

²⁵ J. Sowa, *Fantomowe ciało króla. Peryferyjne zmagania z nowoczesną formą*, Kraków 2011, p. 435.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 21.

*an aunt who was a courier for the UPA
never betrayed herself
she gave herself up to no one when they imprisoned her
and took her in for questioning
[...]
and it was she who (visiting us from
Pozezdrze) in 1978, demanded
that we all address her in Ukrainian
but this is my choice to make, too.²⁷*

The choice to write in Polish indicates the mechanism of “internalizing foreign cultural models” rooted in a process of self-colonization “free of coercion from an outside party.”²⁸ The conscious choice of Polish as the language of expression leaves an imprint of “betrayal” on the project, which is reinforced by the words: “and I am not / blameless, for in spite of whom do I write in Polish.”²⁹ This diagnosis in the poet’s argument lays bare the ambiguity that haunts his poetic strategy of writing “Polish against Polish.” By evoking painful moments from Polish-Ukrainian history thought using expressive tools affiliated with the culture of the oppressor, the poet enunciating these words claims a position that postcolonial critique would describe as “comprador.”

This term describes representatives of an elite class who are indoctrinated into the “culture of colonial rule” while

²⁷ E. Tkaczyszyn-Dycki, XXVIII. *Przyjazd z Pozezdrza*, [in:] idem, *Nie dam ci siebie w żadnej postaci*, Kraków 2016, p. 30.

²⁸ J. Sowa, op. cit., p. 20.

²⁹ E. Tkaczyszyn-Dycki, CLXXXIV. *Źródółko*, [in:] idem, *Oddam wiersze...*, p. 215.

officially belonging to the oppressed social group. They end up mediating “the process of exchange between metropolis and periphery, broadly understood.”³⁰ As a rule, the academic and artistic communities tend to serve this function, for they are tasked with representing their own people as guardians, but are simultaneously called on to translate the directives of the hegemony. This position is not necessarily to be conflated with complicity or collaboration, for it more closely resembles an act of accommodation: the adaptation to roles imposed by the dominating culture, bound up with feelings that range from reluctance to contentment.³¹ If we trace this complex range of behaviors and positions one can adopt toward the oppressor to their roots, we find the phenomenon of oppression, which seeks to negate cultural and historical difference and to identify the experience of the colonized as primitive. At this point, should we attend to the emerging question: How does Tkaczyszyn-Dycki transgress offensive forms of speech? To illustrate this mechanism, I will borrow a description of local culture’s assimilation into the dominating center as the former enacts its “ironic reflection.”³²

Bhabha highlights mimicry as a strategy, defining it as the inversion of domination through contradiction, and the reevaluation and deformation of “discriminatory

³⁰ D. Skórczewski, *Teoria – literatura – dyskurs. Pejzaż postkolonialny*, Lublin 2013, p. 169.

³¹ See: *ibidem*, p. 170.

³² H. Gosk, *Opowieści “skolonizowanego/kolonizatora”*. *W kręgu studiów postzależnościowych nad literaturą XX i XXI wieku*, Kraków 2010, p. 64.

‘identity effects.’”³³ This figure excellently captures the negative mechanism by which ambiguous and complex space is crystallized, allowing one to wriggle free from the state’s vigilant gaze and to evade the trappings of control.³⁴ This process lays bare the machinations of power by shifting emphasis from identity to difference, where resemblance to the symbol is retained, while the “I” and its “double” are revealed, thereby disrupting the process of knowledge production and undermining the dignity of this operation.³⁵ By throwing the colonizer off balance, the colonized expose the colonizer as an unworthy representative model for the oppressed, although he subjects them to his will. This will is then only ostensibly accepted by the colonized. This, in turn, reveals the contradictory nature of colonial discourse and exposes the forces of oppression and agency. A paradigmatic example of this mechanism is the difference between “Englishness” and “Anglicization,” for the latter introduces a disruptive element – a kind of distorted mimesis that will never allow the object to be reflected in full, thereby condemning its object to incomplete representation. By repeating the “partial presence,” man as imitator (adopting attire and forms of behavior that signal that he is “just like you”) “articulates those disturbances of cultural, racial, and historical difference”(signifiers of skin color, faith, modes of thought, and education that signal that he is “other”) and ultimately weakens the position of authority.³⁶

³³ H. Bhabha, *Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse* [in] October 28/1984, p. 131.

³⁴ H. Bhabha, op. cit., p. 112.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 114.

³⁶ See: Ibidem, pp. 80–85.

Tkaczyszyn-Dycki, in turn, draws out the difference between “Polishness” and “Polonicization”, which is articulated on a linguistic level (through the intrusion of Ukrainian words in the text: *kuteń, psiuk, dzieciuk, husi-ata, czerecha, hniłki*) and in the form of a “cultural schizophrenia” vis-a-vis the past.³⁷

*what did grandpa do for the UPA? i couldn't say
i don't want to know but his brother,
i'll tell you, was one of bandera's thugs who killed
Poles
what could grandpa have done
in the UPA when they burned down
our village? i don't know
and don't want to know, although
surely, at the very least, he set the fire*³⁸

By evoking the ghosts and phantoms of the past, Tkaczyszyn-Dycki is able to “convert non-history into history,” (Lotman’s phrase)³⁹ thereby drawing to the surface the ambiguity embedded in Polish-Ukrainian relations that leaves neither side blameless. The poet’s perspective lays bare dominating (nationalist) narratives suggesting

³⁷ B. Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory. Contexts, Practices*, London 1997, pp. 182–183.

³⁸ “co twój dziadek robił w UPA? nie wiem

nie chcę wiedzieć ale jego brata
banderowca zabilili Polacy
co twój dziadek mógł
robić w UPA kiedy płonęły
nasze wsie? nie wiem
nie chcę wiedzieć choć
zapewne podkładał ogień i nie tylko.”

E. Tkaczyszyn-Dycki, XXVI. *Piosenka o rezunie*, [in:] idem, *Nie dam ci siebie...*, p. 28.

³⁹ Y. Lotman, *Culture and Explosion*, trans. W. Clark, Berlin 2004.

that Bandera's men were the only parties guilty of murder. By rehabilitating the murderers, he manages to free them from stereotypical (and offensive) trappings, ultimately enunciating a hybrid model of identity.

Formally speaking, the narrating subject of Tkaczyszyn-Dycki's poems is affiliated with the Polish cultural center, although his peripheral position marks him with the signs of alienation. At the same time, the poet's work makes a mockery of all claims about the universality of identity, and the force of its influence is reinforced by Tkaczyszyn-Dycki's idiomatic diction and exploration of diverse lexical registers. This creative strategy allows the poet to demonstrate that the representative of a (self)colonizing culture can express him or herself through a voice that hybridizes the self with the foreign.

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