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Post-Cold War Literature of Migration: East-Central European Consciousness between Exile and Diaspora

Abstract: This article seeks to provide a provisional taxonomy of the various kinds of literatures of migration produced by writers with an East-Central European background both before and after the fall of the Iron Curtain. More specifically, it discusses the movement away from "exile" literature within the context of the Cold War to different forms of post-1989 diasporic (self-)representation. I will focus on three texts in which the narrative modes adopted dramatize an array of identity struggles and existential crises faced by characters grappling with a rapidly changing world order, marked by the disappearance of the initial reason for relocation, but also by an acknowledgement of the impossibility of return. Emerging in conditions of literal and metaphorical displacement, these texts – the fictional memoir *Why is the Child Cooking in the Polenta?* (2012) by Aglaja Veteranyi (Romanian-German), and the novels *The Black Madonna of Derby* (2008) and *Sweetest Enemy* (2012) by Joanna Czechowska (British-Polish) – are different from earlier exilic writing in both the historical context of their production and their hybridic, liminal status between cultures. Poised precariously on the cusp where exile and diaspora meet, their characters embody all the nuances of the migrant sensibility – from loss, alienation, and despair to the realization of new potential and creativity.

Keywords: diaspora, displacement, East-Central Europe, exile, identity, migrant literature, post-Cold War Europe

> It may be argued that the past is a country from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity. Which seems to be self-evidently true; but I suggest that the writer who is out-of-country and even out-of-language may experience this loss in an intensified form. It is made more concrete for him by the physical fact of discontinuity, of his present being in a different place from his past, of his being "elsewhere." (Rushdie 1992, 156)

The end of World War II saw a hypertrophy of expatriation, either in the form of political exile (with legions of artists, writers, and intellectuals from behind the Berlin Wall fleeing the censorship of the Communist regimes), or as the mass migration of large swathes of former colonial populations seeking to escape the economic deprivation of their newly liberated countries, and chasing the mirage of an affluent and welcoming West. Consequently, the exilic and diasporic space

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has, for nearly half a century, been the privileged locus of "articulating the predicaments that disfigure modernity" (Said 1994, 403) – the abuses of power, the political control of the past, mass deportation, imprisonment, collective dispossession, and the lure of utopias. The migrant, in her various guises, can thus be seen as the quintessential political figure of our time,[1] a site of contestation, unease, and unrest, both part of and at one remove from the societies in which she seeks to find protection, acceptance, and a new life. Post-Cold War global events have pushed the hitherto shadowy figure of the migrant onto centre stage: she has become the embodiment of a contrasting ideological landscape in which unprecedented levels of mobility and cultural fluidity wage daily battle with renewed anxieties about the "stranger within" and the invading "Other" from outside.

My aim here is to briefly describe the transition from "exile" literature within the context of the Cold War to different forms of post-1989 diasporic (self-)representation in the literature written by writers of Eastern European descent. There is, of course, a significant fluidity to this transition, and the categories I use to classify literary writings produced outside national borders during this period (both before and after 1989) should be taken mainly as an effort to systematize a vast and diverse body of work rather than as an exercise in epistemic straitjacketing. The three categories I operate with are as follows:

(1) pre-1989 exilic literature, produced by émigré writers who fled Communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, either to North America or Western Europe (e.g. Norman Manea, Herta Müller, Milan Kundera);[2]
(2) post-1989 transitional literature, struggling to seek a new position of articulation within a rapidly changing world order, marked by the disappearance of the initial reason for relocation, but also by an acknowledgement of the impossibility of return (e.g. Domnica Radulescu, Aglaja Veteranyi, Vesna Goldsworthy, the post-1989 fiction of some of the older exiles such as Milan Kundera);
(3) the literature of migrant and diasporic consciousness, which finds parallels in second-generation post-colonial texts (e.g. Joanna Czechowska's *The Black Madonna of Derby* [2008] and *Sweetest Enemy* [2012], or Marina Lewycka's novel *Two Caravans* [2007]).

1 See Thomas Nail's crucial study on migration, *The Figure of the Migrant* (2015).

2 I call these pre-1989 exilic writings even though many were published well after 1989, particularly by those writers who only escaped Communism late in the 1980s, such as Norman Manea or Herta Müller. But their most salient characteristics place these narratives in the anti-Communist exilic category rather than in what I call the transitional period.

In the pre-1989 literature of exile, the main purpose of the narrative is by and large to throw light on the oppressive circumstances which made emigration necessary, rather than to engage in any meaningful way with the host cultures. Many such works embrace a liminal space which constantly juxtaposes capitalized, brutal, traumatic History with the various "little" narratives of individual resistance or defiance. An acute consciousness of exile is visible throughout: the texts are backward-looking, ironic, and somewhat nostalgic; there is very little engagement with the cultural reality of their authors' host nations; instead, the focus is on rearticulating a past distorted by official propaganda and on the retrieval of individual or collective resistant memory. Exile, in this understanding, has a more "definitive connotation" of "terminal loss" (Said 2002, 173), signifying a space of permanent "non-belonging" (177).

The literature of transition, emerging in conditions of literal and metaphorical displacement, is different from older exilic writing in both the historical context of its production, and its hybrid, liminal status between cultures. It is, perhaps, the first truly diasporic mode of writing, exploring "what it is to have complex, multiple identities, a simultaneity of attachments and memories that 'do not necessarily *succeed* one another in historical memory but echo back and forth'" (Clark 2002, 278; emphasis in original). The narrative modes adopted (involving generic hybridization and the frequent occurrence of surreal, carnivalesque, magical-realist, or otherwise non-realist episodes) are often a mirror of the split consciousness of exile in which the different geographical and temporal coordinates of the past constantly intrude upon the present, rendering it doubly foreign – not only fragmentary, but also alienating. While the past – in its spatial and temporal contours, as well as in the dramatization of a split, schizoid subjectivity – infuses most of the fictions of transition (the protagonists tend to be radically displaced exiles, uneasy in their new locations, or struggling to find a new identity in an environment that is often perceived as radically removed from their previous life experiences), these writings do engage with the coordinates of their authors' host cultures. Here, diasporic consciousness can be said to have reached its peak, with positive "newness" (see Rushdie 1992) struggling to emerge from a clash of cultures and subjectivities. This is why "translation, multi-centeredness and 'multiple adjacencies' are all endemic to the diasporic condition" (Clark 2002, 278) and prevalent in the work of both first-generation post-colonial authors and the post-1989 East-Central European "diasporized" émigré. In some cases, we can see the contours of this positive self-realization emerging from the discordance between the need for personal continuity of the self, and the constant and abrupt changes it has been forced to accommodate (as in Domnica Radulescu's novels or Vesna Goldsworthy's 2005 memoir

Chernobyl Strawberries); in other cases, the self cannot hold the incompatible movements together, and it fractures, or, to use Aglaja Veteranyi's metaphor, shatters into myriad pieces like a mirror that can no longer hold a unified image of the person together. In yet other cases, as in Kundera's "French novels," the landscape of the contemporary host culture is contrasted, in an ironic and not altogether favourable manner, with ideological brainwashing under Communism. The disenchantment with the "transition" to the Western package of capitalism, freedom, and democracy is clearly evident in his post-1989 novels.

If the transitional literature uneasily sandwiched between exile and diaspora bears many similarities with the works of hyphenated, first-generation post-colonial writers, post-millennial diasporic writing seeks to express the complex processes of cross-cultural exchange brought about by successive waves of migrant mobility. In this sense, it is more akin to second- or third-generation metropolitan post-colonial writings (such as those by Zadie Smith, Hanif Kureishi, Andrea Levy, Kiran Desai, and others): the focus is firmly on the present – the past does resurface, yet it functions mainly as a memory backdrop which the migrants look back on nostalgically, but with little to "exorcize." Migration itself has a different ontological status: it is perceived as a provisional movement, not a final destination – there always exists not only the possibility, but often also the actuality and frequency of return, and the links with the mother country and the past are not severed, as was often the case with exilic literature. In the older literature of exile, the status of and relationships to the mother country were constantly problematized – most often, the latter is an oppressive space, yet one from whose gravitational pull the émigré cannot escape. The political valence of much contemporary migrant fiction is more diffuse, and more cosmopolitan and transnational in scope. In the terminology proposed by Graeme Dunphy (2001), the "emigrant perspective" (with its focus on the past and the place left behind) is steadily replaced by the "immigrant perspective" (with a focus on the present and the new place), while magical realism or surrealism are replaced by a politics of estrangement, or what we might call reverse exoticism: in much of this fiction, the representation of the new local cultures is voyeuristic and comedic – the gaze of the migrant is turned back on the hosts, with the writing portraying the latter's habits, mores, and customs as odd, funny, or downright uncivilized (e.g. British drinking culture). In what follows, I will exemplify these latter strands of writing by briefly looking at three texts from the transitional and diasporic categories.

1 The bitter-sweet taste of emigration: Aglaja Veteranyi's *Why Is the Child Cooking in the Polenta?*

Aglaja Veteranyi was a Romanian-born Swiss writer of mixed parentage (Hungarian and Romanian). Her quasi-autobiographical narrative written in German, *Warum das Kind in der Polenta Kocht?* [Why Is the Child Cooking in the Polenta?] (2012), is probably one of the most problematic and traumatic representatives of what I have termed transitional fiction. The text is as hybrid and liminal as its troubled bicultural émigré author: part surrealist poem, part monologue, part diary, the whole does not cohere in any conventional or traditional novelistic sense, and is indicative of the many ruptures its protagonist – who is a remembered child-version of the author herself – has suffered in the course of multiple dislocations and relocations as the child of a family of itinerant circus artists who have been thrown out of (or escaped) Communist Romania (it is never quite clear what their status is and how exactly they left Romania). The structure of the text is a Bakhtinian combination of the carnivalesque and picaresque; yet, unlike eighteenth-century novels of travel and adventure, filled with optimism about the potential for growth and development, Veteranyi's text presents childhood experiences that are often traumatic in nature. The narrating child's voice is fractured, sometimes surreal, mixing genres and registers in a manner that suggests a reworking of the child-like imagination from the perspective of the grown-up adult she has become. There is little sense of a nostalgic yearning for a lost homeland (indeed, the lost homeland is a place of fear and terror, just as much as the new places are), while the sense of adventure characteristic of the early picaresque narratives is replaced by fear and foreboding at a potentially destructive future (the narrator is haunted by constant anxiety about her mother's unwitting self-immolation as a result of her death-defying circus act). Yet, while the form is touchingly innocent in the apparent naivety of the questions the narrator asks, their subliminal or otherwise symbolic nature points to a retrospective reconstruction of that childhood voice, now forever lost. When she asks "Does God speak foreign languages? Can he understand foreigners too?" (Veteranyi 2012, 7), or "How many places are foreign countries?" (87), her questions resonate with a weight that speaks for all displaced or in-between creatures forced out of their native tongue into a linguistic and cultural Babel that is as confusing as it is traumatizing, and compelled to forever "translate themselves."

The title of Veteranyi's book, which has a surrealist cruelty reminiscent of Buñuel, might have been intended by its publishers as a commercial ploy that capitalizes on the public's thirst for sensationalism, yet it is fully congruent with the

author's suicide a decade earlier. Its narrative does not resolve the incongruity between the foreigner's permanent outsider status and the possibility that exile can open up a space for newness to emerge. "Dispersal" and "fragmentation," those signifiers most beloved by certain versions of post-colonial criticism, are not necessarily successful in resisting an abiding sense of unbelonging and marginalization. On the contrary, the "unhomely" and "unhoused" are the central organizing metaphors here: unlike the more directly retrospective fictions of politically motivated emigration, these texts of transition emerge at the intersection between a past that has vanished and a spatial instability given not only by the real change in geographical location, but also by the changing fluidity of their authors' former homelands. Like the more recent post-millennial migrants, these first-generation exiles can go back whenever they wish – but the landscape they find bears increasingly tenuous connections with the remembered and re-imagined landscape of home. Hence the pervasive sense of loss such texts exhibit is stronger than that which permeates both older exilic and more recent migrant fictions.

2 (Dis)continuities and (dis)integration: Mapping the migrant soul in Joanna Czechowska's *The Black Madonna of Derby* and *The Sweetest Enemy*

> Zosia: "'History was all that really mattered', thought Zosia. 'If we don't know who we are and where we came from, we are nothing.'"
> (Czechowska 2008, 532)

> Wanda: "'Why do they always live in the past?' […] The future was the only thing that mattered to her. She didn't care about these old people, old wars, old quarrels. It was history that caused wars – if people didn't know about the past, they wouldn't fight over it."
> (Czechowska 2008, 278)

Novels such as Joanna Czechowska's *The Black Madonna of Derby* and *The Sweetest Enemy* neatly bridge the gap between the transitional and the post-millennial literature of emigration. This is chiefly because the narrative is conceived – much like Zadie Smith's cosmopolitan novels of second-generation post-colonial migrants – as the story of several generations of immigrants, each illustrating the specific way in which they relate to the traumas of the past (both personal and familial, and historical in a larger sense), and how they negotiate an ever-more tenuous sense of national belonging. In *The Black Madonna of Derby*, too, the past and history weigh heavily on the characters – like much of twentieth-century European history, it is a past of crimes, separation, and heartache, and it refuses to

let itself be forgotten. If we are to use Kundera's metaphors of lightness and weight (cf. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 1985), the Polish world of exile as it manifests itself in Czechowska's novel is one of burdensome weight which keeps the characters imprisoned within the traumatic world of the past, whereas the settled, plain, often unimaginative life of the locals is one of lightness – of emergent consumerism (in pre-packaged foods and new TV sets), pop culture (witness Beatlemania), stars, and fashion. However, its 2012 sequel, *The Sweetest Enemy*, which continues the story of the Baran family through the 1980s and 1990s, is already much more centred in the present, with a large proportion of the narrative dedicated to the lives and tribulations (amorous and otherwise) of its second-generation British-Polish protagonists.

The three generations of the Baran family reflect, each in its own way, the struggles inherent in exile. The elderly generation is scarred by war memories and often unable, or unwilling, to stop living in the past; their children, the first generation of migrants, struggle to fit in and build a life in a country which has received them as war refugees, and to which they owe their current well-being, but to which they feel they do not really belong; and the second migrant generation of "hyphenated" British Poles are caught between their cultural heritage and their desire to belong in their country of adoption, to no longer feel and be perceived as different or foreign.

Even though she has been living with the family of her miraculously found daughter, with whom she is reunited in Britain after they were separated in 1942 during a Nazi raid in Warsaw, Babcia, the matriarch-grandmother of the house, refuses to learn even basic English and continues to live in a wholly made-up world of private and public life in Poland before her husband, the "Prince," died. The circumstances of his death, which are gradually revealed to us in the course of the narrative, have very little to do with the heroic story she spins and which she earnestly imparts to those of her grandchildren who are willing to humour her, particularly the bright, scholarly Zosia, who absorbs her grandmother's stories like a sponge. As a consequence, Zosia grows up with this mythical construction of the past, both of her family and of "old Poland," which values honour and heroism above all. This sets her on a collision course with the new post-war British reality in which she lives: she is constantly bullied at school and considered odd on account of her bookishness and excessive scholarly proclivities; like many old-fashioned Eastern Europeans, she scorns what she sees as the petty preoccupations of her sister and her peers, which are merely normal girlish teenagers obsessed with music, make-up, fashion, and stars. Zosia is the serious one – the only thing that interests her is the past, and it is this obsession that eventually leads to her untimely death in the Poland that she so longed for, but whose dilapi-

dated, crumbling Communist present is as remote from Babcia's stories as her character is from the country into which she was born.

At the opposite pole is Zosia's elder sister, Wanda, who chooses to live wholly in the present and whose ardent wish to fit in is constantly thwarted by the ubiquitous presence of her Polish roots, at home in the person of her grandmother (who pays little attention to her, since she is neither as good-looking, nor as bookish or clever as Zofia), and in the public sphere of the Catholic church they all attend and the Polish club attached to it. This desire for integration, however, is simply a pained response to her grandmother's dismissive attitude towards her. In effect, Wanda is a much more complex and multidimensional character than both her "pure," rigid, and unapproachable sister and her fully anglified brother whose only interests in life are football and making money. Janek/Johnny is so eager to leave his roots behind that he accepts what at the time was a very rare occurrence indeed, namely taking his English wife's surname after marriage, in the hope that he will inherit the printing shop of his conservative father-in-law, who wishes to keep "business within the family."[3]

Yet Zosia, despite her looks, kind soul, and eagerness to learn, is herself, in many ways, as blinkered as her brother – she lives in the artificial world fostered by her grandmother's stories and further aggrandized by her hyperactive imagination: she chooses to live in old Poland, or, rather, a particular version or narrative of that country, one that does not include the "plebs," those "plain, ordinary" souls like Wanda or Pawel that she so despises. Her Poland is a half-fictitious construct preserved in the desires and imaginations of those who were forced to leave it behind and could never call the "elsewhere" their home. In this respect, even though she is born and bred in England, she feels more alien to it than both her immigrant parents: her highly intelligent mother, Helena, who has (temporarily) abandoned her intellectual ambitions in order to take up work in a factory, and her plain, ordinary father, Tadek (whom Babcia treats with the same veiled contempt she shows for Wanda). When visiting her aunt's friends in Cracow, "she [...] realised that this was the life she craved – good food, intelligent conversation, historical knowledge, no one ignoring her or putting her down. No one call-

3 Zosia is taunted and bullied, interestingly, on account not primarily of her Polishness but of that particular version of Eastern European intellectual pathos that is so alien to the English temperament. It is not her putative nationality that sets her apart, but her desire to appropriate a particular version of her Polish identity, one that is at the furthest remove from the anti-intellectualist traditions of the English "commoner." Her brother, though obviously clever, never flaunts his brains and is happy to play football and abandon school at sixteen for the much worthier middle-class ambition of making money. Between Zosia and her brother there is an abyss, and Wanda is the bridge between them.

ing her a snob, a show-off, a spotty git, miss lah-didah, too big for her boots. Zosia fitted in, she was at home" (Czechowska 2008, loc. 2613). This is why, when Pawel describes her to his friend Bogdan, with whom he is involved in printing and distributing samizdat publications, as being "more interested in the past than the present," Bogdan retorts ironically, "Well, that's a well-known Polish disease" (Czechowska 2008, loc. 2053). It is, one might add, the typical disease inflicting immigrants of all kinds, in which a romanticized version of the homeland, heightened by nostalgia and the propensity of memory to distort the past, vies with an often difficult and unfulfilling present. It is the same disease that has symbolically destroyed Zosia, and which is exhibited in full at the Polish club, which, as Pawel remarks with astonishment, "lives in a time-warp" (Czechowska 2008, loc. 3244). Not only do they wish to preserve a corner of Poland in this faraway foreign land, a desire which is, after all, understandable, and common to all immigrant communities, but the Poland they wish to preserve is one that no longer exists. Like so many post-colonial migrants, their inability to fully accept their new location also translates into an inability to face the contemporary conditions and transformations of the countries they left behind – in this case, contemporary Communist Poland, whose problems and struggles they are alien to: "They have completely ignored the reality of communism in Poland and live in a little Poland that doesn't exist anymore, if it ever did" (Czechowska 2008, loc. 3244).

While both sisters feel alien in the country of their upbringing, Wanda's insecurity stems from the obvious marks of her foreignness (her name, her religion, her Saturday schedule dedicated to a Polish version of the scout club, which she thoroughly hates), rather than some actual inability to integrate. More importantly perhaps, she feels "different" because of the other markers of what she perceives to be her "inferiority," those of her family environment, in which certain standards of good looks, smartness, and good behaviour – those dictated by the towering figure of the *babcia* – are seen as superior and desirable. Her qualities, which only her father perceives and appreciates – practicality, a certain sensual warmth, generosity of heart, and a capacity to forgive and move on – are not those of the heroic "Poland of the mind" that her grandmother and then her sister tragically wished to preserve at all costs, even if that meant destroying a child's self-confidence. This is why, as Wanda puts it after her strained meeting with her sister in London, they "don't speak the same language" – both literally (Zosia constantly insists on Polish, while Wanda is always replying in English) and metaphorically. To schematize somewhat, the London-based Wanda longs to be part of the England of commerce, shops, fashion, and the aspiring lower middle classes, whereas Zofia is constantly looking back to an old world of learning, manners, history, and heroes, the world fashioned by her grandmother and to which the Poland of the present stands in such contrast. As for Janek, a summary post-

colonial reading of the novel reveals that Maxine's English family seem to have little trouble accepting "Johnny" into their fold as long as he is willing to abandon all traces of his foreignness, including the ultimate stamp of his alien status – his very name. If the foreigner is willing to become a "mimic man," then he is tolerated – perhaps even accepted, particularly since the visible signifiers of difference are not or no longer present (after all, "Johnny" is tall and fair-skinned). Otherwise, he or she remains an object of derision (Zosia) or an exotic token of one's cosmopolitan inclinations (Wanda to her London pseudo-friends).

Wanda can thus be seen as the only truly "hybrid" character in the book, the one who has managed to harmonize the past (her language, traditions, cooking, history with a small "h") with her present life in Britain: she works in a pastry shop and is fully integrated within her provincial Derby community, and she teaches English and Polish at the Polish church club, in short, she has become the best version of what she could be. This is probably why she was chosen by the author to be the protagonist of the novel's sequel, *Sweetest Enemy*, which returns us to the Baran family during the Solidarity decade in Poland and the early 1990s, after the collapse of the Communist regimes in East-Central Europe. Wanda and Pawel are married, and their highly intelligent daughter is "the spitting image of her auntie Zosia" (Czechowska 2012, chapter 27, loc. 1964) – but, unlike the long-lost sister Zosia, Anna is a perfectly adjusted British-Polish child, a living testimony that intellect and good looks can coexist perfectly well with being likeable and popular at school. Along similar lines, after nearly forty years spent in Britain, Wanda's mother and Babcia's brilliant daughter, Helena, is finally exorcizing the demons of her past, that traumatic moment in Poland when she "was [...] thrown into a German truck with scores of other strangers and forcibly removed from the country" (chapter 36, loc. 2723) and the loss of her daughter Zosia, taken away by the same country that had ejected her at the tender age of sixteen. Finally, she takes on the challenge of sifting through the debris of this past, going back to the place of her trauma, and assembling it all into some sort of coherent whole – even while simultaneously fulfilling her long-frustrated intellectual potential by completing the book about her family's and country's past that is symbolically entitled *The Fragmented Mind*. The sequel to the original novel provides much-needed closure, and Zosia's ghost is finally put to rest in her mother's intellectual accomplishment, which pulls together the personal and historical threads that had been her daughter's undoing.

As this very brief discussion has hopefully shown, even though there are differences of degree, quality, and circumstance that distinguish various kinds of migratory movements (such as political exile or economic migration), they are all

linked by a similar ontological status of rupture/mutation/displacement. The views of home and diaspora, here and there, now and then, as they emerge in the fictions of migration, correspond rather well to what Edward Said describes in *Reflections on Exile* as the distinguishing features of a displaced person. In contrast to the "legitimate" inhabitant and rooted citizen, the immigrant is "neither here nor there, but rather in-between things" (Said 2002, 99). In the case of exile, the two complementary but contradictory movements – "that of keeping the memory of the lost native spaces alive and that of reinventing oneself in new and foreign spaces" (Radulescu 2015, 11) – produce a permanent split between that which was lost and may be irretrievable, and that which is unfamiliar, alien, perhaps hostile. This dynamic is played out differently in the case of voluntary migration, in which the space left behind is usually not irretrievable; but a certain degree of loss is a prerequisite to any moving away. *The Fragmented Mind*, the title of Helena Poniatowska's book in Joanna Chechowska's *Sweetest Enemy*, written by a representative first-generation immigrant poised precariously on the cusp where exile and diaspora meet, can be seen as the key to understanding the migrant sensibility – that harbinger of new potential and creativity. In the words of one such unhoused sensibility, "one confronts and accepts dispersal and fragmentation as part of the construction of a new world order that reveals more fully where we are, who we can become, an order that does not demand forgetting. Our struggle is also a struggle of memory against forgetting" (hooks 2002, 148).

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