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Coming to terms with the North

Scandinavia in Polish culture at the turn of the 21st century

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Abstract

The article deals with representations of Scandinavia in Polish literature from the 1980s to the second decade of the 21st century. The basic claim of the article is that a shift in the Polish imagination from the West to the North has occurred through literature and growing public interest. This shift began with efforts to transform the initial stereotype of Scandinavia as a land of prosperity. In subsequent stages, the imaginary was expanded by literature to include the themes of equality, social trust and self-correcting modernity. Complicating the image of Scandinavia made it into a viable alternative to Western modernity.

Keywords: Scandinavia, The North, stereotype, imagined geography, equality, trust, self-correcting modernity, performative



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1. INTRODUCTION

The following essay discusses the presence of multiple discourses and representations of Scandinavia in Polish literature over the last few decades.¹ Since the late 1980s, more than 150 books on Scandinavia have come out in Poland, a number which bears witness not only to the popularity of Scandinavian culture in a Polish context but also to the structural role of Scandinavia as a comparative system with regard to the redefinition and renegotiation of Polish national identity that has taken place in the post-communist period. Using as a point of departure readings of texts by Adam Zagajewski, Dorota Masłowska, Maciej Zaremba, Elżbieta Cherezińska, Zygmunt Miłoszewski, Manuela Gretkowska, Zbigniew Kruszyński, Michał Witkowski, Grażyna Plebanek and Bronisław Świdorski, the essay argues that a change in orientation has occurred in the Polish social and geographical imagination. The basic idea is that in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, Polish culture pushed the social imagination from the West to the North.

This does not mean that the Polish imagination has severed its ties with Western Europe. Rather, it has succeeded in creating additional linkages with the North which have undermined Poland's traditional position along the European East-West axis. The creation of these linkages is ongoing. This by no means represents an abrupt about-face, but rather, a complex, ongoing and evolving process of establishing relations with a newly rediscovered neighbour, reconstructing its image, and introducing it into Polish culture. It is a partial relocation, involving the establishment of a new comparative system.

The earlier alignment had been created as a result of Poland's loss of national independence (1795). From that moment on, for two hundred years, the imagined state and the imagined Polish community defined themselves primarily in relation to Russia and Western Europe. The goal of actions and the measure of success on this axis was gaining independence from the eastern hegemon and becoming more like the West. All political and economic plans, collective dreams and accomplishments were measured in imaginary kilometres, as the key task of Poland and Poles could be boiled down to the recommendation: "As far from Russia as possible and as close to the West as possible".

Becoming disentangled from this alignment required moving away from not so much a system of subordination, but primarily from an imagination shaped by the partitions and sealed by the discourse of Yalta geopolitics. Until recently, as Andrzej Stasiuk observes,

one could reflect upon France, Europe and America, but one's fate seemed unavoidable as it was virtually impossible to extricate oneself from the grip of geography and to change one's place of birth. All the more so since both France and Europe did not give a damn about this geographical entanglement. (Stasiuk 2013:177)

The apparent release from the "grip of geography" after 1989 was no doubt conducive to Poland's breaking free from this East-West axis. After the collapse of communism, Ukraine and Belarus now separated us from the crumbling Soviet empire, while France and Europe stopped "giving a damn" (in Stasiuk's words) about our place on the map. Still, the (partial) relocation of the Polish imagination up North was more than just a matter of taking advantage of the historical moment, of a sudden release from the cage.

A gradual process of relocation had been evident even earlier. It did not involve physical displacement, but rather a 90-degree turn of the vicarious map. The texts and constellations of texts that project Poland's place on this new axis propose the fashioning of a new geography and a different history, within which the previous tasks of defending Polish culture

¹ This essay was originally delivered as a keynote lecture at a research network seminar in Poznań in January 2022 (editors' note).

from Russian foreignness and imitating the West prove insufficient. This cultural refashioning underpins public debate and sets this map into action. After all, Poland's place on the map is a product of narratives rather than geographic coordinates. We inhabit more or less elaborate stories that designate objective and physically describable spaces. Our narratives, in turn, exert an influence on the notion of place. When we inhabit a culture, we exist in a set of relations, and for these relations to be produced, stories are needed.

It is precisely such stories about the North that I will address in this text. I will present a dozen works of culture, including films, novels and reportage, which I will treat as both stimuli and symptoms. As cultural stimuli, these works have propelled public debate to create a closer relation between Poland and the North. In turn, their symptomatic nature lay in their expressing the desire to define anew the goals of social life. After all, this emergence of the North stemmed from a growing interest in the Scandinavian lifestyle. Poles were wondering: "What is the secret behind the Scandinavian model? What needs to be done to achieve the same? Can this model be copied? Does it have its dark sides?". The above questions made Polish culture's gravitation towards the North (I will deal here primarily with narratives about Sweden and Denmark)² a two-pronged subject of investigation, requiring both a search for the sources (and root causes) of Scandinavia's successes and an inquiry into the prerequisites and limits of the possible introduction of this model in Poland. For this reason, literary representations should be treated as being performative, the real function of which is not to present the truth about Scandinavia, but to suggest a new "task" to the public imagination. This task is to learn something about one's own culture by learning about a foreign one.

2. SHIFTING COORDINATES

A convenient (if arbitrary) starting point for reconstructing the process of this emergence of a new image of the North is the 1989 film *300 Miles to Heaven* by Maciej Dejczer. It tells the story of two boys, Grześ and Jędrzek Kwiatkowski, who in 1985 hid in a truck's chassis to flee from Poland to Denmark.³ Dejczer's movie, recognised as the best European film by a young director in 1989 (Lewandowski 2004), was symptomatically located on the historical boundary between the old and new periods.⁴ As a boundary work, it expressed a generational conviction about the impossibility of living in Poland. During a dramatic conversation between the parents and the boys, which takes place after the brothers have been granted asylum in Denmark and the parents have been stripped of their parental rights by the communist regime, the boys' father shouts into the earpiece of his telephone: "Don't you ever come back here! Do you hear, Jędrzek? Never!".

The identification of Poland as a place unfit for living is connected with the way out of this trap the boys employ. They initially wanted to escape in a stolen plane to Austria, and only later came up with a plan to escape to the North. Their plan was not preceded by any concrete reconnaissance. Their knowledge was derived from movies, television, gossip and, above all, newspaper photos, that depicted a beautiful and friendly capitalist world. Their spontaneous decision was part of a reorientation of the imagination. After all, the young refugees' decision did not open up a new direction of emigration, but rather validated an already existing one (many of the Polish-Jewish emigrants of the late 1960s settled

² I am leaving out an increasingly numerous body of texts about Iceland, the Faroe Islands, or Greenland, which warrant a separate discussion.

³ The film was based on a true story: fifteen-year-old Adam and twelve-year-old Krzysztof Zieliński made their way from Poland to Sweden in 1985, hiding in the chassis of a truck.

⁴ This discussion could also begin with a book summarizing several centuries of cultural relations – cf. Janion, Nilsson & Sobolewska (1991).

in Sweden, which the boys were unaware of).⁵ This validation concerned something very simple: it turned out that capitalism was closer than the West and that a better world was not confined to Germany, France and England.

One can assume that the boys were attracted to the stereotype of prosperity. But in the mid-1980s, this stereotype was already accompanied by a search for a new perspective on Polish culture. This intention can be discerned in Adam Zagajewski's book *Solidarność i samotność* (Solidarity and Solitude, [1986] 2002). In this collection of essays, the author tries to restore autonomy to Polish literature, to restore its right to disengage from social and political issues. Zagajewski pairs his proposal for a shift in the orientation of literature with a (modest) proposal for a new place on the map of Europe. In one essay in the collection *Wysoki mur* (High Wall, 1984), Zagajewski constructs a fictitious situation: his arriving in Poland as a foreigner in the early 1980s:

What would happen if I became a foreigner for a while? If, at least for the time it takes to write this article, I slid into a foreigner's Western smooth skin and took a short ride to my home country? I would [...] be Dutch, or Spanish, or maybe Danish [...]. I would [...] be a better Dutchman, Spaniard or Dane; I would understand every word and every pause in conversation. And I would also know why the young Polish poet sitting across from me, who speaks lousy English, so insistently repeats the word "truth" over and over. (Zagajewski 2002:37f.)⁶

The figure of a fictional foreigner plays a dual role here. First, he represents a marginal part of Europe, which Poland can somehow fit into. Thus, not France, England or Germany, but the Netherlands or Denmark, where the author ultimately takes residence, a country of lesser stature in Europe and in a peripheral location. This was necessary to make the perspective more realistic. From the point of view of Germany, France or Britain, the Poland of the 1980s appeared as the birthplace of "Solidarity", a country under the subjugation of Soviet Russia. This perspective fostered disproportionate comparisons and generated stereotypes that hindered communication.

The second function of the foreigner served to expose and overcome stereotypes. Instead of the perennial "Poland vs. the West" alignment, Zagajewski constructs here a "Poland-West-Denmark" triangle, which reveals the real, albeit implicit, goal of any presentation of Poland to the Western world. This goal is to gain recognition. All lists like those of "great Poles" (Copernicus, Chopin, Skłodowska), "Polish contributions to Europe" (the Battle of Vienna, stopping the advance of Soviet Russia in 1920), "European offenses against Poland" (betrayal in September 1939, betrayal at Yalta), and the "suffering of the Polish nation" (loss of the state, millions of casualties during World War II, persecution by the Soviet regime, suppression of Solidarity) are meant to evoke not only admiration and praise, but also guilt and a desire for reparation, as well as sympathy and solidarity.

The complicated struggle for recognition that takes place during encounters between a Pole and a Western citizen has its cultural consequences: it leads to the idealization of Europe. After all, if we are to be appreciated by a great nation (French, English), then its greatness must remain flawless, without contradiction, conflict, or divergent worldviews.⁷

⁵ The present Polish diaspora in Sweden and Norway comprises around 100,000 persons each and is the largest group of migrants in them from European Union member states — *Raport o sytuacji Polonii i Polaków za granicą 2009* (2009).

⁶ All translations of the Polish literary texts quoted here are by Marcin Turski.

⁷ "This is the way Europe exists in Central Europe — in the imagination, in hope, in an illusion — in hunger. [...] If we manage to get a passport and see the West, we protest the existence of all those who offend our vision of Europe. We cross out the pacifists, 'soft' social democrats, homosexuals, lesbians, environmentalists, drug addicts, sex maniacs, supporters of the radical avant-garde, Marxists, supporters of abortion, feminists, dodecaphonists, the old left, the new left, Günter Grass, Willy Brandt, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Danes, Finns and opponents of the Pope. What's left? Europe — Central Europe?" (Ibid.:45).

In order to deserve recognition on the part of the impeccable West, we, too, must be uniform; the removal of contradictions from the image of Europe results in their elimination from one's own image. The question, "What are we like (from the perspective of the West)?" is thus part of a desperate spectacle: desiring that a superior culture appreciate us, we glamorise that culture and thus demonstrate our own greatness. This game of recognition that lesser cultures engage in with dominant ones always tends toward the grotesque, which at its starting point is marked by an inferiority complex and a fear of being ignored.

Zagajewski changes the scale: the Dane he has invented places Poland in relation to a small northern state, rather than in relation to the powers of the West, which frees Polish culture from its megalomania and the related frustration of perpetual rejection. Therefore, the Dane of the essay strengthens our cognitive desires and weakens our discretionary ones. The repositioning of the comparative system, however, raises questions about the future:

What would happen if one day [...] Poland regained its freedom in political life? Would the wonderful spiritual tension, certainly not a feature possessed by the whole nation, but at least by its quite numerous and quite democratic elite, survive? Would the churches become deserted? Would poetry become, as it has in happy countries, food for a handful of bored connoisseurs, and cinema just one branch of commercialized entertainment? Would whatever [...] emerged as a response to the dangerous challenge of totalitarianism cease to exist on the very day that challenge itself disappeared? (Ibid.:37)

We therefore understand that the pursuit of a freedom akin to that in the imagined happy West entails the danger of exhausting one's own history. If Poles dream of a perfectly "Western" Europe (without the Left and sexual emancipation), they reach the end of the history of freedom before they even attain freedom. The goal of one's historical aspirations, therefore, cannot be to achieve recognition from the "great ones", but to maintain one's independence in defining one's historical goals. In this new narrative, the question of recognition does not disappear, but the desire for respect should be about relations between members of Polish society rather than admiration on the part of a mythical "West".

All of this is revealed simply by looking at Poland from a slightly oblique, Danish perspective.⁸

3. WELFARE AND EQUALITY

The first stereotype about Scandinavia was a simple one: it is a land of prosperity. Imbued with stability and security, the stereotype invited repetition, but at the same time it prompted questions. What would it take to make things better in Poland? Is prosperity linked to morality? What needs to change and what can remain the same?

The above dilemmas were addressed in Dorota Masłowska's (2005) novel *Paw królowej* (The Queen's Peacock). In it, the author offers a portrait of Polish society just after Poland's joining the EU, when it could not cope with the discrepancy between European living standards and the miserable conditions at home. This gap was exacerbated by the increasingly widespread use of the English language. Misery continued to dominate everyday life, but people were changing their lexicon and using terms like "market", "target" and "star". Even profanities were becoming more civilized, and instead of vulgar words like "cock" and "cunt", you began to hear terms like "penis" and "vagina". But since even profanities lie, some other, independent means of expression needed to become the voice of truth.

⁸ In his novel *Spis cudzołóżnic* (List of Adulteresses), set in the mid-1980s, Jerzy Pilch (1993) ironically invoked Zagajewski's essay, depicting a protagonist engaged in a recognition game with a representative of Scandinavia.

In the novel, this is represented by rap,⁹ a culture of rebellion pitting the urban margins against the system. Masłowska demonstrates how the market devours all elements of counterculture, changing them into successive pop music offerings. As the “specialist on media and media-related issues” in the novel notes, what is important is that “everything should bear signs of being niche, alternative, and marginal with respect to official culture in order to reach all those rebellious punks and vegetarians” (Masłowska 2005:146). It is impossible to attack the mainstream in such a world, as any rebellion against official culture will be re-formatted, packaged and merchandised for the desired audience. If an artist remains independent, the market will simply produce imitators.

Masłowska makes the status of art in the world of late capitalism the subject of her novel, but this poses a risk. She wrote her text in the rhythm of a rap song. By showing hip-hop¹⁰ as a culture which is gradually being consumed by a market-driven Leviathan while simultaneously using its rebellious rhythms, the author confronts the reader with an irresolvable ambiguity: could a novel about the contemporary powerlessness of criticizing culture retain its critical force? In other words, is emancipation within capitalism feasible?

This question allows us to return to the dream of Scandinavia. One of the novel’s protagonists, Stanisław Retro, contemplates the North in his thoughts of withdrawal and escape:

[If only to be] a good honest Swede, a Knut, Hamsun or Alfred, with Pete as a middle name. To carve spoons and forks out of wood, to catch a fish with an honest look in a silver river in faraway Sweden, that upright and beautiful country. To go to the market on Saturdays to buy marsh-mallow candy with Swedish money for your Swedish children, to have a wife Lina so pure and honest that you don’t even want to shag her, for fuck’s sake, but just to lie by her side, lie and watch her eat food, breathe air; to feel safe and secure by her side, far away from those people so false, evil and rude, spewing untruths on the Internet. (Masłowska 2005:19)

In Stanisław Retro’s trite dream, Sweden is an arcadia of normalcy fashioned out of clichés. There is nothing there but stereotypes loosely linked to happiness. Yet this can be considered a subsequent stage in the constitution of the North. Its image is so stable that it can be referred to as a matter of course, while at the same time, it invites revision. This ushers in a new stage of fitting in with the North. While Stasiuk wrote that “one’s fate seemed unavoidable” and that one could not “change one’s place of birth” (Stasiuk 2013:177), Masłowska replies: “Let us at last start to fight Poland’s adverse geography” (Masłowska 2005:38). A trite imagination leads to a new stereotype and signals what needs to be changed to make it possible to inhabit it.

In the novel, the Swedish dream is articulated in the language of male eroticism, which is patriarchal, misogynistic and sexist. The unusual thing about Masłowska’s prose, however, is that her characters can babble poetry: the lame artist in *The Queen’s Peacock* dreams about having kids and a wife along the lines of a tabloid idyll. Still, even within the convention of the trivial sublime used by the protagonist, Polish fantasies give way under the onslaught of images of the North. In Stanisław Retro’s imagination, the image of Sweden is contingent on a weakening of the male libido, which proves that even such a blunt mind has aligned

⁹ A decade later, Masłowska returned to rap as a rhythmic model in the novel *Inni ludzie* (Other People, 2018); importantly, in *The Queen’s Peacock* rap is the language of rebellion against a society that imitates others’ reality, while in *Other People* rap is only expressive of frustration.

¹⁰ In 2001, Sylwester Latkowski, a Polish director of documentaries and music clips, shot the film *Blokersi*. He depicted the Polish hip-hop culture, rap soloists and music bands and young people associated with Poland’s housing estates – blocks of flats built from prefabricated concrete slabs – typical of the country’s socialist period. The 2012 movie *Jesteś bogiem* (You Are God, dir. Leszek Dawid), commonly regarded as his most outstanding achievement, focused on the band *Paktofonika*, which had a profound effect on Polish hip-hop.

a trivial dream of prosperity with the stereotype of gender equality. This creates a “good place” where one wants to be, even though it prohibits a man from “shagging his wife”, and at the same time, does not yet hint at a new role.

This is the moment when the Polish mass imagination as portrayed in literature introduces a second stereotype into the imagery of Scandinavia: equality. If Sweden is an arcadia, then equality is enjoyed by everyone within it.

We find this theme in various registers of literature. This includes Elżbieta Cherezińska’s (b. 1972) tetralogy *Północna Droga* (Northern Way; *Saga Sigrun*, 2009; *Ja jestem Halderd* (I am Halderd), 2010; *Pasja według Einara* (Passion According to Einar), 2011; and *Trzy młode pieśni* (Three Young Odes), 2012), where she skilfully fictionalizes the familial and tribal life of Norway in the 10th and 11th centuries, and thereby familiarises readers with key changes that foreshadow a modern Europe: the disappearance of the family and the ducal order in favour of a united kingdom, and the transition from polytheism to Christianity. Women play a vital role in the saga; the author credits them with the ability to fight to change their position in the home, the marital bed and even the tribal council. Associations with the North are addressed differently by Zygmunt Miłoszewski (b. 1976), one of the most interesting Polish crime novel authors. His trilogy starring Prosecutor Szacki has enjoyed tremendous popularity (*Uwikłanie* (Entanglement), 2007; *Ziarno prawdy* (A Grain of Truth), 2011; *Gniew* (Rage), 2014). Szacki shares a kinship with Kurt Wallander (the protagonist in many books by Henning Mankell, the renowned Swedish crime novel author), for example, both possess a passion for tracking down inequalities (racism, domestic violence). Cherezińska’s saga about Vikings and Miłoszewski’s stories about a Polish prosecutor are in a sense complementary: an interest in medieval Scandinavia is part of a broader perception of the North as an alternative source of Polish statehood,¹¹ while references to Swedish crime novels imply that a similar struggle to complete the egalitarian mission of modernity is taking place on both sides of the Baltic. At the same time, there are traps in the common roots or similarities of the Polish-Swedish struggle against inequality: while in the 10th century the Vikings arrived in what is now Poland, this happened as part of a conquest; while prosecutor Szacki has more to do than commissioner Wallander, this is because Polish culture has for decades legitimized domestic violence and fed on xenophobia. In order to prevent the shared Polish-Swedish codes from turning into an illusory sense of sameness, Michał Witkowski in his novel *Drwal* (Lumberjack, 2011) employed ironic disillusion: he openly admits that he wants to achieve success by referring to “Swedish crime novels”, making it clear that market prosperity has little to do with emancipation. Additionally, he depicts a Polish coastal provincial town (Międzyzdroje) as having been colonized in the present day by Swedish capital.

The above examples prove that in the first decade of the 21st century, Scandinavia started to become differentiated within the mass imagination, and stereotypes of prosperity and equality began to merge; these were both reproduced and challenged, serious and ironic, with questions being asked about the relationship between the two. This made the North an important field of play in relation to modernity.

¹¹ Cf., e.g., Urbańczyk (2012) and Skrok (2013). According to the authors, Mieszko I’s ancestors came from Scandinavia; in the 10th century they inhabited Kievan Rus, from where they reached Greater Poland (Wielkopolska) and accelerated the process of transforming separate principalities into a state.

4. GENDER EQUALITY

Since the beginning of the 21st century, books about the North have engaged in a form of discursive play where stereotypes are increasingly and more readily challenged. In common discourse, the North is no longer an attractive tourist destination, but a frame of reference for the creation of stories about late modernity in Poland.

As already indicated, gender equality was crucial for reorienting the Polish imagination. Significantly, during Poland's expeditious education about emancipation in the 1990s, intellectual inspiration was drawn from French and Anglo-Saxon thought, while examples concerning everyday life more often came from Scandinavia. The biography and writing output of Manuela Gretkowska seem highly symptomatic in this regard. After spending several years in France (from 1988 to the early 1990s), where she set the plot of her first four novels, allowing her heroines and protagonists to define themselves and their freedom independently, the author moved to Sweden (1997–2000). In her autobiographical novel *Polka* (A Polish Woman, 2001), Gretkowska described the ordeal of her own pregnancy and delivery in Poland, criticising Polish ways of caring for pregnant women from the perspective of Swedish rights and customs. At the same time, she became a social activist, and was especially active working on behalf of women and the dignity of motherhood, transforming the “Poland is a Woman” movement into the Women’s Party (2007). Gretkowska’s activism is a model embodiment of the reorientation of the imagination and the influence of cultural geography on the formation of social reality discussed here. The author’s stay in France helped her leapfrog over several stages of emancipation and encouraged her to initiate a (smart) struggle for her own independence. Her stay in Sweden, in turn, pushed her to take action to modernize Polish law and Polish customs in the struggle for the dignity of others.

In order for this to happen, the story of returning from exile to Poland had to break free from emigrant fears of failure. As long as the conviction expressed in the dramatic outcry prevailed: “Don’t ever come back here!”, a return from emigration could be equated with defeat. However, when emigrants began to return, it turned out that it was possible to be richer even without economic capital; one came back with a changed mindset concerning social relations and was ready to act on their views.

At the same time, it seems significant that in literature, trying to come to terms with Scandinavia brought together representatives of all social registers. Thus, we learned the dream of an average Polish macho male (Masłowska 2005) and the wrath of a progressive prosecutor (Miłoszewski 2007; 2011; 2014), the experiences of a feisty intellectual (Gretkowska 2001), and the projected history of the emancipation of a Viking wife (Cherezińska 2009–2012). The above list can be supplemented by Grażyna Plebanek (b. 1967), with her portrait of a cleaning lady in her novel *Przystupa* (2007). The author herself, a writer of prose, short stories and plays, spent five years in Stockholm (2000–2005), though her book is not autobiographical. The novel’s heroine, Dorota, a girl from the countryside near Lublin, cleans “people’s places”, first in Warsaw and then in Stockholm. Her social position does not change, as both in Poland and in Sweden she occupies a place “at the bottom”, cleaning other people’s dirt. Still, when the protagonist adds a gender perspective to her class outlook, she realizes that she has found herself in a different society, where men do not disdain women, there is no prying from the nosey priest or moral approval of domestic violence. Thus, if no one lets Dorothy pass in front of them at the door and no one kisses her hand, it is not because she is denied respect, but because she is respected as an equal.

This class and gender perspective seems to be precisely the result of filling in the image of the North with more details. Narratives embedded in specific biographies (of women, men, educated and uneducated people) had by now aggregated knowledge about the realities of life in the North in Polish literature. This offered favourable grounds for an interpretation focused on systemic regularities.

5. SCANDINAVIA AS A MODEL?

If individual stories primarily answered the question, “What was it like (in Sweden, Denmark, Norway)?”, systemic narratives seek answers to the question, “What rules lie behind cases taken from everyday life?”. Such reflections can be found in Maciej Zaremba’s ([2008] 2013) collection of reportages *Polski hydraulik i inne opowieści ze Szwecji* (The Polish Plumber and Other Stories from Sweden),¹² one of the most significant works published on Sweden in Polish (or in Swedish, as the Swedes themselves admit). A Swedish journalist of Polish origin (born in 1951, he emigrated in 1969 with his mother in the wake of an anti-Semitic campaign led by Poland’s communist government) and author of the award-winning book *Higieniści. Z dziejów eugeniki* (Hygienists. From the History of Eugenics; Swedish ed. 1999¹³; Polish ed. 2011) on forced sterilisations in Sweden, Zaremba is a rare case of a reportage author who managed to instigate a change to existing law.

The *Polish Plumber* collection, more shocking than most Swedish crime novels, depicts diverse phenomena. Among them is Swedish health care, which must be financially viable and thus focuses on the illnesses which are beneficial for hospital budgets. Another case is social care institutions, where the staff members who demonstrate more than cold professionalism are made redundant by law. There is also the history of sailors who fought against the Germans during World War II and were punished for this, as the heroism of a few exposed the collaboration of the rest. Then there is the case of Swedish trade unions demanding equal minimal pay, ostensibly to benefit migrants, but in reality eliminating competition and working to the detriment of the “Polish plumber”, who can no longer offer lower prices for his services. There is also the case of a bizarre Swedish law which mandates sanctions on the mentally ill as if they were healthy, since the law recognises that human beings, endowed with free will, are accountable for their actions. Hence, in Sweden the mentally ill are tried as if they had no mental issues, and then, once in prison, they are offered psychiatric aid.¹⁴

Each of Zaremba’s reportages begins with a specific case study. The investigation, however, leads not to the perpetrators, but to the conditions of perpetration, i.e., social, historical, cultural, legal, or customary factors that have defined Sweden’s social reality. Equality plays a key role among these factors. Everything that is recognized by Swedish morality and approved by law must meet the test of equality. It is the normative idea guiding all social life. And it is precisely as such that it becomes the most important and problematic protagonist in Zaremba’s book, inspiring both jealousy and horror. This is because it defines the world in which the Swedes are trying to legally regulate all aspects of equality.

Following the author, we must briefly note the implications: if all people are equal, then old people living in nursing homes must receive identical care throughout the country. Therefore, those employees who add some cordiality or a human touch to their duties, with no regard for regulations, must be fired. If all are equal, then the mentally ill cannot be treated

¹² The Swedish original *Den polske rörmokaren och andra berättelser från Sverige* was published in 2006 (Stockholm: Norstedts).

¹³ The title of the 1999 Swedish edition is *De rena och de andra: om tvångssteriliseringar, rashygien och arvsynd* (Stockholm: DN).

¹⁴ On a more comprehensive review of legal issues, cf. Płatek (2007).

as people without consciousness or free will, so one must assume that what they have done (committing a crime), they have done with premeditation. If all are equal, then all have the same right to happiness, and therefore if someone is not happy, they have every right to seek someone (a teacher, boss, carer, partner) to blame for their lack of fulfilment.

Sweden, as depicted by Zaremba, is both a utopia and an anti-utopia. It is a utopia because equality has been realized in it and an anti-utopia because the quest to extend equality to all aspects of life breeds legally mandated absurdities and injustices.¹⁵

However, when according to the rules of Zaremba's investigation, we ask about the root cause of this situation and about the conditions for a possible modification of seemingly inadequate solutions, we discover the reasons for the success of the Scandinavian model. Indeed, it goes almost without saying that such equality policies (even if flawed) can be introduced only in a well-functioning state. It was not the hopeless state of the judiciary or the health service that led to the anti-utopia, but the persistence of the idea of modern equality, precise legislation, a well-communicated society, and the efficient introduction of new regulations. A system that works in this way could not have been created and could not continue without trust. It was not spawned by law and was not compromised by improper legal regulation. What would compromise the system would be if the authorities had refused to make such changes. The system exists because the public trusts both its validity and its corrective capacity. In this way, *The Polish Plumber* reveals the second pillar, after equality, of the Swedish model of society: trust. It is accompanied by a third one, self-correction. If Sweden did not absolutize equality, it would not be facing problems. Yet the Swedish state can resolve them, because modernity functions there as a constant system of checking and correcting collective decisions (after Zaremba's reports, a commission was set up whose decisions led to changes in Swedish law and the health care system).

Having identified the three pillars of the Scandinavian system, Polish literature reached a point that signalled a need to return home. Literary texts had revealed the conditions for being part of the North: identifying and weakening (or abolishing) the foundations of inequality,¹⁶ building a network of social trust, and monitoring the potential for rectifying systemic flaws. If a society is to meet these conditions, it must expect that it will make the same kinds of mistakes and thus create a self-corrective system.¹⁷ This modernity emerges not via imitation of foreign patterns but via translation.

6. ABSOLUTIZING FREEDOM

Let us again confront two emigration experiences, that of the West and of Scandinavia. In the early 1990s, Polish literature included numerous stories about leaving Poland, living abroad, experiencing shifts in identity, and having hopes that clashed with the realities of living in a foreign country (Gretkowska, *My zdies' emigranty*, 1991; Bieńczyk, *Terminal*, 1994; Goerke, *Fractale*, 1994). A significant change here was a gradual attenuation of the worldview that had informed the Polish literary diaspora throughout the entire postwar period.¹⁸ "Emigration" in postwar culture had been seen not simply as living in exile,

¹⁵ On the extensive consequences of equality negligence — cf. Rosanvallon (2011); Wilkinson & Pickett (2011).

¹⁶ In the introduction, the author notes that Polish society, like Swedish society, derives ninety percent from the peasantry. However, while this origin is an object of pride for Swedes, for Poles it is a source of shame; Swedish democracy was built by peasants, Polish democracy was built by the intelligentsia; the Swedish state was built "bottom-up", whereas the Polish state was built "top-down".

¹⁷ "We are a [...] test pilot of innovation. The pilot forgot almost completely where they took off from and no wonder we continue to razzle-dazzle the world. One thing is certain: all the ills and boons described in this book, trends and fashions, will sooner or later haunt other countries aspiring to modernity and progress, although probably in a milder form" (Zaremba 2013:9).

¹⁸ Cf. Bakula (2001).

but as an idea that validated the decision to leave one's homeland and live abroad. "Being an emigrant" meant "representing Poland abroad", having a mission, sustaining the life of "one's true homeland", and "giving meaning to Polishness". This "mission" was served by an émigré network of institutions that assisted newcomers, cultivated Polish customs and produced Polish culture. The decline of this discourse and the associated infrastructure in the late 1980s was the first signal questioning the validity of applying the term "emigration" to this new exodus.

As early as the mid-1980s, participants in the exodus had signalled that their reasons for leaving the country did not fit into earlier concepts. In classical emigration discourse, the reasons for emigration were divided into political and economic ones. The political emigrant left the real homeland in order to work for their imaginary homeland, while the economic emigrant left the real homeland in order to be able to earn money for the imaginary one. Both were ready to return, but the political one wanted a more dignified life in the homeland and the economic one wanted a more comfortable life. The emigration of the late 1980s added a new, existential motivation to this dichotomy. In her debut novel *My zdies' emigranty* (1991), Manuela Gretkowska observed:

The youngest generation, which means me, left in 1988. This year was not one of Pole-hunts [i.e., politically inspired roundups or oppression—P.C.]. It was simply another year in the People's Republic, and I decided that one more year in the country would be unbearable. And that was it. (Gretkowska 1991:10)

Natasza Goerke similarly observed:

Perhaps I too left in pursuit of something, though to this day I haven't figured out what. It was more of a journey *toward something*, not a flight *away from something*. I really liked my anguished and drab Poland, where one could fruitfully *emigrate* internally. (Goerke 2006:173)

Thinking back to the moment of their departure, both writers clearly emphasize their non-political and non-economic motivations for this move. They left Poland in search of a different way of life rather than in search of higher wages or more effective ways of fighting communism. This fostered renewed existential reflection and led to a loosening of the ties between identity and place. The emigrant was turning into a migrant, who in leaving a country identifies less strongly with the place they have left, but does not necessarily choose the new place for good, either. With disarming candour, the narrator of Gretkowska's quasi-journal explains why she seeks to stay temporarily in France:

I have no desire to become a German and explain that I speak German so badly, because I was persecuted in the streets of Toruń as a child for using the speech of my fathers and grandfathers. But if it turns out that I can't live in France, I'll go to West Germany. (Gretkowska 1991:10)

The realisation that one can define and determine one's own identity has a liberating effect for some (Gretkowska), while others are suspended in a melancholic (Bieńczyk) or ecstatic limbo (Goerke). Yet, all of these experiences were true in relation to the *East-West axis*. Migration to France was the furthest-reaching expedition in Polish literature in search of an unconditioned existence. However, it also highlighted the issue of language skills.

Meanwhile, in the northern direction, literature highlighted problems. An outstanding Polish emigrant novel, *Schwedenkräuter* (1995) by Zbigniew Kruszyński (b. 1957; lived in Sweden: 1983–2000) shows a cruise to Sweden as a stage in a mandatory erasure of identity:

My name is...

You won't be able to pronounce it. I've eaten my passport, anyway; it tasted official. [...]

No papers, a transparent memory, no distinguishing features, no language to use. [...]

Being a refugee from nowhere has become so popular lately that they will soon have to hire mute interpreters. (Kruszyński 1995:5)

The difference between the West and the North is thus a linguistic one: a migrant in Germany or France can retain partial linguistic autonomy, while in Sweden they must be translatable as an entity into Swedish. Leaving for the West allows for the possibility of putting together an identity of one's own, whereas migration to the North necessitates the recognition of the superiority of the local culture.

The consequences of this dominance of the local language and the local value system are highlighted by Bronisław Świdorski (b. 1946), an author, essayist, philosopher and scholar of Kierkegaard's philosophy. Primarily known as the author of a seminal book on the Solidarity movement (*Gdańsk i Ateny. O demokracji bezpośredniej w Polsce* (Gdańsk and Athens. On Direct Democracy in Poland), 1996) and a resident of Denmark since 1970, Świdorski transposed his experience as an émigré onto the plots of his two novels: *Słowa obcego* (The Words of the Other, 1998) and *Asystent śmierci* (Death's Assistant, 2007). Both are set in Denmark and focus on the clash between expatriate foreignness and Danish democracy. In the former novel, the conflict is linked to the arrival in Denmark of a mysterious "foreigner", a refugee whose country of origin is unclear. Despite months of efforts by the police and their associate Professor B., the nationality of the newcomer cannot be established and, as a result, he is expelled from Denmark in accordance with the law. Professor B., the author's *porte-parole*, sees this event as the symbolic conclusion to a process: the (perilous and illusory) universalisation of Danish values. The deportation of the stranger means that Denmark becomes a realm of sameness, where what is different can only exist on the condition that its differences are sacrificed for the sake of similarity. Since the identity of the newcomer cannot be established, he cannot be assimilated and thus must be expelled. The Danish system imposes a duty of translatability on every newcomer: you must speak some recognisable language so that we can teach you to speak ours. These are the ground rules of the immigration office. You and your whole life must be subject to assimilative translation, as the untranslatable does not exist. Since the stranger speaks an unfamiliar language, he must go.

In *Death's Assistant*, the author elaborates on the theme of a universalist appropriation of local democracy, depicting two parallel cases: the first, the dismissal of a Dane of Polish origin who inadvertently published an article on Søren Kierkegaard's anti-Semitism in the Polish magazine *Przegląd Polityczny*,¹⁹ and the second, the collective protests of Muslims living in Denmark over the publication of Muhammad's caricature in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*.²⁰

At the heart of the novel, then, is a Danish resolution to the dilemma of freedom: the Kierkegaard scholar's dismissal indicates that Søren Kierkegaard is a sanctity that no one is allowed to violate, while the publication of the Muhammad caricatures stems from a conviction that sanctities do not exist. The scholar's forced retirement implies that Danes have a taboo (the greatest Danish philosopher's anti-Semitism), while the caricature of the Prophet implies that no taboos exist.

¹⁹ Świdorski refers to his own biography here: as a faculty member of the Søren Kierkegaard Research Center (Copenhagen), he published a serious and soundly researched article in Poland on Kierkegaard's anti-Semitism, for which he was forced to take an early retirement.

²⁰ The events took place in 2006. The caricature was published by other newspapers, as well, e.g., *Le Soir*, *La Stampa*, *Der Tagesspiegel* and *Rzeczpospolita*. For a discussion of the events — cf. Pessel (2013).

The obvious hypocrisy underlying these inconsistent approaches stems from the Other's previous exile, the author argues. Danes demand that immigrants conform to Danish culture because they are convinced of their own superiority, and the mechanism for asserting supremacy, according to Świdorski, is to subject everything foreign to cultural translation.²¹ That which has undergone a process of assimilative translation (i.e., has become aligned with Danish identity) can be subject to secular derision, a testament to universal tolerance (if we can make fun of other people's gods, it means we are enlightened), while that which eludes translation must be excluded. In other words, Denmark cannot allow foreign nationals to remain foreign because that would involve giving up the universalisation of its own values. At the same time, Denmark needs foreign nationals in order to place them outside of its democracy and use them as proof of the backwardness of certain societies and individuals.

While Zaremba's reportage highlights the consequences of absolutizing equality, Kruszyński's and Świdorski's novels demonstrate the consequences of absolutizing freedom. These novels demonstrate how such values can turn into an ideology that spawns nationalism and racism. The citizens of an advanced democracy may thus recognize that "freedom of expression, to print and draw [whatever one likes] is absolute in our kingdom" (Świdorski 2007:5); the fact that they are absolute also implies the inviolability of the privileged position of the Danish/Swedish nations to define what is and is not an absolute value.

7. THE SCANDINAVIAN PERFORMATIVE

Poland's literature about the North is far more modest than its vast literature on the West.²² Still, I believe that the conclusions that may be drawn from these few samples are very significant.²³ Above all, literary excursions to the North freed Polish culture from some of the burden of the old East-West dichotomy. They have done so by ironically shattering our expectations of Western admiration, while at the same time pointing to alternative forms of socialization. Films, novels and reportages have uncovered the fundamental pillars of the Scandinavian societal model, based on equality, social trust and self-correction. By doing so, Polish narratives of Scandinavia have also revealed the fact that modernity is always local, while providing their readers with tools for a critical appraisal of the Scandinavian model. The examples of Polish narratives of the North provided here have ranged from utopian visions to dystopian narratives of suspicion. The Utopian vision of Scandinavia as a land of prosperity in *300 Miles to Heaven* is countered by warnings against any such idealization in the works of Zagajewski. Likewise, narratives of equality (Masłowska 2005; Gretkowska 1991; 2001; Plebanek 2007) are matched by narratives of the dangers of its absolutisation (Zaremba 2013; Kruszyński 1995); finally, the emancipatory narratives of Cherezińska (2009–2012) and Miłoszewski (2007; 2011; 2014) are offset by depictions of Scandinavia as a place of exclusion in Świdorski (2007).

In this journey through recent and contemporary literary texts about the North, we have returned to our starting point, Poland. However, one gets the impression that after the journey is over, it is no longer the same country and the same society.

Polish literary texts about Scandinavia are reflexions of the Polish social imagination, i.e., imaginations about Poles' place in the world and the possible paths of development for

²¹ This kind of assimilation pressure also extends to Danes, pushing them to conformism – cf. Springer (2019).

²² I believe that some 150 books on Scandinavia have come out since the late 1980s. In the modest overview I have offered in this text, there is not enough space for most of them. Still, it is worth highlighting at least such books as Katarzyna Tubylewicz's *Moralisci. Jak Szwedzi uczą się na błędach i inne historie* (2017); *Samotny jak Szwed. O ludziach Północy, którzy lubią być sami* (2021); Marcin Czarnecki's *Dzieci Norwegii. O państwie (nad)opiekuńczym* (2016); and Iłona Wiśniewska's *Białe* (2014); *Hen. Na północy Norwegii* (2016); *Lud. Z grenlandzkiej wyspy* (2018).

²³ Cf. Cichocki (2018).

future Polish society. Thanks to the Scandinavian narrative adventure, differences between Poland's relation to the West and to the North have become more distinct. The former East-West axis was based on the belief that Western modernity could be imported. Polish narratives of the North, in contrast, seem to reflect the idea that modernity cannot be copied. It must be translated, which means developing an autonomous definition of the legal basis for attaining equality, public trust and a political system with inbuilt self-correction mechanisms. If we still consider the above tasks relevant and worth undertaking, this means that the Scandinavian performative does indeed work.

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