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**THE MOTIF OF THE MAP IN CONTEMPORARY
PROSE: THE CASE OF STASIUK AND MENTZEL**

The motif of the map belongs to a typical set of motives characteristic of travel writing as well as for adventure novels and novels for young readers. However, it is enough to mention Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz's *Mapa pogody* (*Weather Map*), Miron Białoszewski's *Obmapywanie Europy* (*Mapping Europe*) and *Aaameryka* (*Aaamerica*), and, as far as the poetry of young poets is concerned, for example the achievements of Tomasz Różycki, to conclude that the map is not only one of the *loci communes* of popular literature, but that it also functions quite well in the region of 'High Literature'. It is usually connected with the motif of the journey, and at times it is its synonym. It may be a prediction, a recollection or a projection of a journey—one's own or someone else's journey. It is a requisite of a well-organized traveller, who sets herself goals and fulfils them. At this moment it is worth asking the question: is it limited to travellers only? Magdalena Horodecka distinguishes, following Zygmunt Bauman, three types of *homo viator* who are fulfilled in life and literature. She enumerates: the traveller, the tourist and the vagabond.

For the tourist [...] travels for entertainment, his goal is new experiences, while the vagabond does not know why and where he is going, his movement is episodic, he cannot give it a sense or a meaning or a goal. However, one must learn the attitude of the traveller, because

a journey [...] is an art in the sense of *techne*. This is the skill which has to be worked out and fought for.¹

If travelling means learning about the world, then the map should be understood as a record of acquired knowledge. It is not accidental that we talk about 'white spots', describing in this way empty places in our memory or pages of history which are not written. The map is also a text. It is also the ideal, or perhaps, the idealized, picture of the world. Its schematic aspect is to make movement in the complex world easier.

But the sense of maps' existence is not only pragmatic. Old maps were really objects of art, and they are still objects of connoisseurs' interest. Henryk Waniek, in the essay "Mappa Mundi", stressed this non utilitarian aesthetic valour of maps:

The map is the last existing type of picture—also artistic—which wants to describe the world without false shame. This is the picture which (taking into account its proportion, or a scale) represents worldly reality in an objective way, distorted by interpretations only to a very small degree. If it was not for the fact that maps are the result of the hard work of surveyors, cartographers, draughtsmen and printers, this topic should have been long ago handed over to philosophers of art. But usually we do not associate the creators of maps with artistic fashions, and their hard work with creative euphoria. This sensible and solid hard work is contradictory to arbitrary subjectivism, disturbed by emotional impulses.²

I have tried to describe the presence in literature of the seemingly inconspicuous motif of the map because I am convinced that in contemporary texts—at least to a certain extent—it loses its primary senses of which I have written in the introduction. I will rely in my argumentation on two contemporary texts, which, as it might

¹ M. Horodecka, *Instynkt i filozofia podróżowania w twórczości Ryszarda Kapuścińskiego*. „Dekada Literacka” no. 6, 2005, 41-52.

² H. Waniek, *Mappa mundi*, in Idem, *Opis podróży mistycznej z Oświęcimia do Zgorzelca 1257-1957*, Kraków 1996, 9-17.

seem, differ in everything except for the fact that they are both non-fictional. I will be analysing Andrzej Stasiuk's *W drodze do Babadag* (*On the Road to Babadag*)³ and Zbigniew Mentzel's *Niebezpieczne narzędzie w ustach*⁴ (*A Dangerous Tool in the Mouth*). In both books, obviously, there appears the motif of the map, but in different contexts.

Let us concentrate first on the differences between these two books. Stasiuk's book was called by critics "poetic reportage". For Dorota Kozicka this is a description of "temporary wanderings" in "left out space and time", a mixture of a physical experience of moving through space with the feeling of freedom"⁵. Stasiuk himself admitted that "this book is an art of anamnesis, an art of memory. Maybe it is one more suggestion as to how it should be read and how memory works."⁶

The problem of memory is also present in Mentzel's book, although we have very different poetics here and a very different approach. *A Dangerous Tool in the Mouth* has the form of the *silva rerum*; it is made of micro-novels, articles, essays. The book is a trip down a memory lane. Mentzel connected in it reminiscences from his childhood with his contemporary experiences as a writer, a bibliophile and a stock trader. It is set mostly in Warsaw. Yet, it is neither Warsaw, a place of numerous coteries as described by contemporary prose, nor a 'city-hero' ceaselessly present in literature on martyrdom. It is first of all the city with twisted memory, which is in vain searching for its identity in the changed social, political and economic situation.

But these two books differ not only in the themes discussed or in the literary form. Their protagonists are completely different. It may even be said that they are antagonists; they represent contrastive sets of features. Stasiuk, from *On the Road to Babadag*, is a vagabond who

³ Andrzej Stasiuk, *On the Road to Babadag. Travels in the Other Europe*, transl. by Michael Kandel, Vintage Books. London, 2012.

⁴ Z. Mentzel, *Niebezpieczne narzędzie w ustach*, Gdańsk 2001.

⁵ D. Kozicka, *Podróże Dyżia Marzyciela*, „Dekada Literacka” no 6, 2005, 60-65.

⁶ A fragment of Stasiuk's interview for radio RMF Classic. www.rmfflclassic.pl.

questions traditional models of travelling, who disregards places of interests, monuments, routes. He says himself:

I crossed the country as one crosses an unmapped continent. Between Radom and Sandomierz, terra incognita. The sky, trees, houses, earth—all could be elsewhere. I moved through a space that had no history, nothing worth preserving. (4)

This fragment may be treated almost as a programme declaration of Stasiuk. Anyway, in a different place he claims that he has passed Baranów Sandomierski a few dozen times and that he has never devoted time to sightseeing this “pearl of the Renaissance”. He is interested in revealing what is unknown, in what is known only apparently or superficially. If he embarks on a historical route, this goal remains only a pretext to travel. That is the case, for example, when Stasiuk searches for the grave of Jakub Szela, the leader of a peasants’ revolt in Galicia, buried somewhere in Bukovina. Only wandering is important.

It is a very different case with Mentzel, who searches for traces of memory in what is unknown. Warsaw, an industrial behemoth, is contrasted with the city he remembers from his childhood, which is built out of everyday history, walks along the Vistula river, problems with meat shortages, schoolboy pranks. The period of the destruction of this old, safe world happened in the times of communism in Poland. “We hung on in Praga, more and more isolated, we hung on in the same place.” (16) And we have a thing, very characteristic for Mentzel: taming of the world is performed through reading. The protagonist reads everything, not only books, but it is the books which are most important in his literary wanderings in Warsaw. He searches for them on the rubbish heaps of culture; at times these are literal rubbish heaps. He buys, from a befriended homeless person, books which belonged to Kalina Jędrusik, abandoned and just found in a rubbish heap. But newspapers, instructions and documents are equally important, and—last but not least—maps and plans. Reading possesses saving power; it introduces order into chaotic reality.

When I learnt to read I liked to participate in the everyday life of Warsaw, reading daily newspapers: *Życie Warszawy* (Warsaw’s

Life) and *Express Wieczorny* (*Evening Express*). Both papers wrote extensively on such typical Warsaw rituals as the cleaning of the tunnel on the W-Z route, or saving drunks who had fallen into a moat around the place where polar bears were kept, near the orthodox church and the Przemienienia Pańskiego hospital. (46)

Here Mentzel also differs from Stasiuk. Reading precedes conscious existence, a journey through life. There are more differences: fixed points of reference are things long present in our consciousness, for example the Poniatowski Bridge, which in the essay "Kondukt na moście, którego nie było" ("A Funeral Procession on the Bridge, which Never Was") achieves a metaphorical validity. History is here a durable element of the protagonist's identity. "I realized that Warsaw's history is the history of my family only when I read a journal of my grand grandmother". (47) This is not *terra incognita*, but lost Arcadia which Mentzel—the wanderer—searches for.

With all the differences, it should be stated that similarities begin to appear when the motif of the map and connected issues are introduced. Let us note a basic fact: in each of these two books the map gets a separate chapter. In Stasiuk's book it is "The Slovak Two Hundred", while Mentzel writes about "Plan Warszawy" ("The Map of Warsaw"). In the case of Mentzel's book, what is particularly important is the fact that this is the only fragment of the text which has not been published earlier, while the others appeared in the weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny* (*Universal Weekly*). It is Mentzel himself who informs his readers about this fact at the end of his book.

The second fact: in both cases the protagonists express their desire to have a map which is not useful for any practical purposes. Stasiuk manages quite well in the back country of South-Eastern Europe, and if need arises, he can communicate with the locals to tell him the way. Mentzel knows Warsaw's topography equally well, and he easily moves around both the centre and periphery. The need to have the map is, therefore, deeper than the pragmatism of its owner. Let us compare two descriptions:

The best map I have is the Slovak two hundred [...] The map is frayed and torn. On the flat image of land and little water, the void peeks through in places. I always take it with me, inconvenient as it is, requiring so much room. The thing is like a talisman, because after all I know the way to Košice, then on to Sátoraljañhely without it. But I take the map, interested precisely in its deterioration. (7)

That was Stasiuk. It should be added that similar observations of deterioration appear quite often in his book; Mentzel, on the other hand, has got not just one map, but a whole collection of them:

For many years I kept buying every year “The Map of Warsaw” in new updated editions of Państwowe Przedsiębiorstwo Wydawnictw Kartograficznych (State Cartographic Publisher); studying the street index and the scheme of the public transport was one of the very few activities I really cherished.[...] “The Map of Warsaw” [...] was indispensable to me, so that I could, within the city limits, set areas of my personal interests. Because in the 1960s I was absolutely mad about angling, I used the map of Warsaw to mark my fisheries on the Warsaw part of the Vistula river and stores selling bait and angling tackle. (45, 47)

Let us concentrate, once again, on these clear differences: Stasiuk admits openly that he carries the map with him mostly for sentimental reasons. In a practical sense it is more of a hindrance. It is not handy and takes up a lot of space. Mentzel’s goal is connected with his hobby. Catching fish requires knowing about the ever changing riverbed. That is why he had to keep on buying new maps. But, and this is meaningful, Mentzel did not stop buying maps when he gave up his hobby. “When I stopped catching fish, from the middle of the 1970s, I marked bookshops and second hand book sellers.” (47) Those of us who remember how difficult it was to buy some books in those days would not perceive this change of hobby as drastic; what changes is only the object of ‘hunting’.

In both cases the map has mostly a symbolic function. If it is a picture of the world, it is a picture of the world constantly evolving. The protagonists behave differently when confronted with

these changes. Stasiuk declares that he is only a passive onlooker. The destruction happens in front of his eyes, and its key aspect is that in the place of a mosaic of cultures there comes one, homogeneous culture. Menzel suggests a different attitude: he tries to overcome the ceaseless destruction of the world. Buying new editions of "The Map of Warsaw" is the first of magical moves. The first and basic—he admits the transience of the world and, at the same time, a way to register, to record it. But Mentzel goes further. He tampers with the map. He puts on it his own points, and in this way he creates his own topography. His own, personal map could be called a "cultural cartographic grid of Warsaw". Inertia of historical time is defied through an order of culture.

The search for fixed order, which is seen in the spatial planning, finds in Mentzel's book a more poetic and metaphorical dimension. In the chapter "Ściana w pokoju matki" ("A Wall in Mother's Room") the protagonist returns to his childhood, when he used to help his mother hang on this wall different trinkets. He sums it up in the following way: "The wall in mother's room [...] was a place of ceaseless experiments.[...]My mother had a feeling of ceaseless changes". (9) However, once the protagonist saw his mother "as she stands in front of the naked wall in her room, moves her fingers over its uneven surface, looks at the numberless traces of nails and silently moves her lips, as if she was reading in the Book of Providence, what it has in store for her". (10)

An ordinary wall, covered with nail traces, becomes a map of sorts. Let us notice: the map is created through the mother's constant tampering with trinkets on the wall. Constant changes lead to the state when the change is no longer possible. Simply because the number of holes and plaster patches is too big. We can say that the mother 'gets to the wall', that is to the moment when no move is possible. The wall becomes the map and the wall becomes the point of arrival. This point becomes the critical point at which some order must appear from constant chaos. However, this order would not come if it was not for the ordinary gesture of the mother 'travelling with the finger on the map'.

As we can see, the map here does not “represent the worldly reality in an objective way”, as Waniek wanted, but rather it makes objective one’s own experience of space. It is similar with Stasiuk, although in his case the map becomes the point of departure, not arrival, in the process of learning about the world. It is a medium which triggers the imagination and senses. Stasiuk admits that he earlier treated maps with disdain “It was only a couple of years ago that I began to pay this kind of attention to maps. I used to treat them as ornaments or, maybe, anachronistic symbols that have survived in our era of hard information and full disclosure from every corner of the earth.” (8) The reason for this nonchalance is the complex, historical character of maps. Maps show pictures of countries which have long disappeared. Stasiuk is repelled by their literalness, their cheap realism. However, he also sees his own mistake. The phrases he uses prove the change that he has undergone: “Only a real map could tell us when to start listening for the thunder. Neither television nor newspaper can chart such a concrete thing as distance”. (8) The map gains value when confronted with mass media, as it leaves space open for the imagination. Its advantage is the fact that it is faithful to reality, yet its communicate is radically minimalistic. It shows the most important elements of the world of nature and civilization and leaves the rest to the imagination. It does not force a picture of the world, but merely suggests it.

Stasiuk’s map, however, has a symbolic function, since he writes in this way: “[t]hat may have been why the destruction in my map of Slovakia represented, for me, destruction in general” (8).

In the case of Stasiuk’s motif of the map (as was also the case with Mentzel) an important question arises: does it refer to external reality, objective and common, or is it rather a representation of a plan of an internal journey? The analysis which has been carried out so far seems to suggest the second solution. But Bożena Witosz, in a paper entitled “Genologiczna przestrzeń tekstu (O *Jadąc do Babadag* Andrzeja Stasiuka (“Genological Space of the Text (Of Andrzej Stasiuk’s *On the Road to Babadag*), wrote:

The narrator many times offers his readers clues as to the ways of reading his text. The text is rich in descriptions of dreams, visions, intellectual projections of potential stories, meta signals which point to the fictional nature of the narration [...] [these descriptions] move a reader away from geographical maps, suggesting focus on the aesthetic valour of the text.

However, despite these signals, the space which gets revealed on the pages of *On the Road to Babadag* is not exclusively constructed around the narrator's "own map", and intertextual references are not locked exclusively in the circle of fictional forms. The topographical names—present so profusely—refer to the reality which exists now or which has existed before in a very real manner.⁷

Thus, for Stasiuk the map is not a pretext to escape to the world of his own dreams, but an invitation to an active exploration of the world. And it is also not a simple and absolutely perfect representation of the existing world. For Stasiuk the truth about the countries and places he visits is born out of the confrontation of the Slovak two hundred—for all that, repaired many times with a tape—with the eye witnessing of this part of the world:

On my old taped map the place-names are in Romanian, Hungarian and German. [...] No one thought to write them also in Romany. I think that the Gypsies themselves are the least interested in this. Their geography is mobile and elusive. It very likely will outlast ours.
(76)

The map shows here its limited capabilities in describing the world. It covers only what is static, unchangeable. Stasiuk sees something not so important: the culture of Roma people and their 'geography' remains "mobile and elusive". The result of this observation is the quite feasible idea that it is this very culture which has a chance of survival.

The map, in this way, becomes a cognitive tool—and this is the feature common to Stasiuk and Mentzel. However, in the case

⁷ B. Witosz, *Genologiczna przestrzeń tekstu (O „Jadąc do Babadag” Andrzeja Stasiuka)*, „Ruch Literacki” 2005, no. 4-5, . 475-494, 481.

of Stasiuk, the prerequisite for using it is the virtue of individual imagination, while Mentzel, when he reads maps, tends to see in them as a testimony of collective memory. The map fulfils its function when it saves memories of the past, and in this way gives us a sense of order and of cultural roots. Mentzel shows his predilection for these classical values while writing about the book by Paweł Hertz *Notatki z obu brzegów Wisły* (*Notes from Both Banks of the Vistula*). While describing places in the city which are magical to him [...] Paweł Hertz feels deep philosophical joy thinking that everything happens according to some unusual plan, which “only man can learn about, understand and use [it] in his grand, important life plan.” For Paweł Hertz the sense of harmony, which gives “peace and strength”, is magic. It is magic which puts the people of this city together “those who disappeared in the abyss of time, those who live and labour today, and those who will come after us.” (51)

The discovery of the external order, the order governed by visible space, condition the discovery of the internal order, which here is called “an important life plan”. And Mentzel’s magic of the map is exactly about this. It constructs an invisible bond between the past and the future. Stasiuk questioned a similar relationship, he minimized it, although he has not rejected it wholeheartedly as he still keeps carrying his Slovak two hundred with him. In both cases maps become talismans, attempts to record the world in its changeability. In both books discussed here the map is useless without active participation on the side of the owner. For Stasiuk it triggers the imagination; for Mentzel it is one of the pillars of memory. And finally, we could conclude that—at least for these two writers—the map symbolizes the world which was and has gone, but which still remains an important point of reference. All the differences I have pointed to, which in the light of what just has been written seem not very important, are the result of the fact that the map is used by different protagonists: Stasiuk the vagabond, and Mentzel the traveller. The vagabond rejects what the traveller seems to ennoble. “It is good to come to a country you know practically nothing about. Your thoughts grow still, useless. [...] In a country you know nothing

about there is not reference point". (79) However, both of them travel, avoiding beaten tracks, leaving these tracks to jaded tourists, no matter if they are in the wilderness of Central Europe or the streets of Warsaw. For both writers the map has a meaning similar to the one of which Waniek, quoted at the beginning, wrote:

The map does not make us suffer from the injustice of disappointment. And probably is connected with magic stronger than any other artistic game. Painters' pictures overuse mastery and jugglery, they are predominantly virtuoso performance. The map does not delude us with optical tricks or the skills of illusionists. And discretely puts us on a spiritual trail. It absorbs our emotions and thoughts, rummages at all levels of our souls.⁸

Briefly speaking, the map is an invitation for adventures—the ordinary one—that which allows us to discover the world anew, but also the deeper one, requiring more effort—the intellectual and spiritual journey.

Surely it would be going too far if we tried to take these two writers as representative of the whole of contemporary 'cartographic prose' (here I have in mind those texts in which the motif of the map becomes a metaphorical generalization). However, the very frequency of this motif allows for some generalizations. Let us point to some example titles: Magdelana Tulli's *Sny i kamienie* (*Dreams and Stones*), Olga Tokarczuk's *Podróż ludzi księgi* (*The Journey of the Book-People*), Paweł Huelle's *Opowiadania na czas przeprowadzki* (*Moving House and Other Stories*), and also his novel *Castorp* (*Castorp*). In all these texts the map fulfils the functions mentioned earlier. It appears first of all as:

- a figure of what cannot be known
- a trigger of the imagination,
- a symbol of the world's transience and disintegration.

Anyway, these functions are very often interconnected. They are also variations on the same topic: the map is not a record, a transfer of reality. It does not faithfully show relations between places and things, it does not bring order, it only simulates it. At the same time it leads to a game

⁸ H. Waniek, op. cit., 11.

of imagination with space, it asks questions about what is hidden, about margins and 'white spots'. It is transferred from the symbol of things utilitarian and concrete into the figure of the impossibility of learning about the world. The intuition about the impossibility to describe the world was presented in similar terms by Olga Tokarczuk:

All works of art, despite the fact that they confirm how our closeness to God, are in fact results of accidental effects of attempts to express what is inexpressible and finally turn out to be a childish aping of God's plan of creation.⁹

This fragment is not directly concerned with maps. I am quoting it here because it deals with a problem which is wider, but directly connected with the reduction and shifts of the meaning of the map motif. Each work created with man's hands, according to the rules of *mimesis*, is crippled. This same inability appears in the novel of Magdalena Tulli: "The city can neither be described nor drawn, the reality of the city blocks is resistant to orthogonal projection."¹⁰ At the same time, however: "Despite this, in any place one can buy a street map of the city folded into sixteen or thirty two and marked on the surface with a special configuration.[...] These names printed in the tiniest lettering beneath closed eyes evoke images of Sunday mornings, autumnal clouds racing atop the rooftops, people in overcoats, cracked flagstones in the sidewalk, a music store with cellos, an Alsatian dog with a newspaper in its mouth, and a hundred thousand other things."¹¹

The map as a literary motif expresses constant, dramatic tension between the impossibility and necessity of framing reality according to the laws of reason. The world escapes schematic representations, man's ordinary need to look for order leads to such representation. Our contemporary prose, more than ever, acknowledges the incommensurability of these two forces.

⁹ O. Tokarczuk, *Podróż ludzi Księgi*, Warszawa 1998, 90.

¹⁰ M. Tulli, *Dreams and Stones*, translated by Bill Johnston, Archipelago Books, New York 2004, 49.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 50.