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*THE CITY AS MEMORY IN CONTEMPORARY POLISH WOMEN'S
LITERATURE*

Abstract

The research is based on the hypothesis that geographical spaces reflect the imprint of social, political, historical and cultural life. Spatial representations of settlements are the projections of social crisis and historical periods. The city has its own vocabulary and language, reflected in its buildings and spaces. These 'speaking' cities are open in space and time, and become theatres of self-writing, as the spaces of the city try to find forms of expression to see unspoken traumas, that is, theories of the city are also theories of the subject.

The main question of the investigation is: what are the specific possibilities and challenges for Polish contemporary women's literature to mobilise social memory and to create possibilities for confronting the traumatic past? Using examples from Olga Tokarczuk's novels *Dom dzienny, dom nocny* (Day House, Night House) and Joanna Bator's *Piaskowa Góra* (Sand Hill), I will present the relationship between memory and coming to terms with the past in the historical context of East-Central Europe in Poland. In particular, I will focus on the ways of reflecting on historical events of the Second World War and the regime change of 1989.

A further aim of the research is to explore how Polish women's literature after 1989 attempts to come to terms with the great social traumas of the twentieth century. In the following, I intend to examine the fictional representation of the culture of memory of the 1989/90 regime change in the body of contemporary Hungarian and Polish women's literature in order to find a common intersection of Central and Eastern European literatures.

Keywords: urban theory; spatial politics; Polish literature

Introduction

This paper uses examples from Olga Tokarczuk's novel *Day House Night House* (2014) and Joanna Bator's novel *Sandy Hill* (2009) to illustrate the relationship between memory and the processing of the past, the ways of reflecting on different historical events and the different interpretations of the city. I start from the hypothesis that urban and geographic spaces are political, cultural and social reflections, and that, as a consequence, the cityscape is always an imprint of history. Settlements are spatial representations, while buildings are silent traces, projections of social crisis and historical epochs. The city has its own vocabulary and language, reflected in its buildings and spaces. These 'talking' cities provide a kaleidoscope of social and cultural change, as they constitute an interdisciplinary category that can be interpreted from sociological, psychological, geographical, political and historical perspectives (Szewczyk, 2015). The sites that are presented in my writing are not permanent, they travel in time with memories and migrating inhabitants,

functioning as a kind of non-places. For both Tokarczuk and Bator, the places live mainly in memory, in meaning, and unfold storylines of cities that have not yet begun to speak, but are now beginning to take shape as previously silenced experiences. The city is a space with a complex structure, whose changes affect the lives of the actors, and the altered space affects the identity of individuals.

Dimensions of memory

Relationship with the past

Focusing on memory helps to reveal the narratives of the past, to show how identity is constructed through language and discourse, while these constructions also build a larger group consciousness. In revealing memories, we reveal representations of reality, but to tell any story we need a selection of what is recalled. Some memories may be interconnected, while others are disconnected and dissonant. Sometimes individual memory is at odds with collective memory and remembers things differently, things that the official narrative condemns to silence and oblivion. The traumas of the unprocessed past can be dangerous and processing, remembering, is necessary to move on, i.e. it is an integral part of transition.

According to Jan Assmann, the question of identity is also a question of memory (relation to the past). The past is reconstructed by remembering, and the past is preserved by entering into a relationship with it. Shared knowledge, rules, values and memories of a shared past can bind separate individuals into a community. The capacity to remember is an individual skill, but a culture of remembering is also a social obligation, and seeks to prevent forgetting. In defining collective memory, Jan Assmann (Assmann, 2004). emphasises that the group, like the individual, uses the past as a building block of self-image. In summary individual memory is always socially determined, since collective memories are interconnected and individual memory becomes the site of these interconnections. Memory is thus the result of the experiences, sources and ideas of different groups, to which the individual is also linked (Assmann, 2004). Based on Jan Assmann's summarizing work, the external dimension of memory has four sub-areas: mimetic memory, memory of geography and objects, communicative memory, and cultural memory. For the purposes of the present study, it is useful to analyse memory as preserved by places and objects in more detail. For thousands of years, man has surrounded himself with objects, which reflect an image of his personality and identity and remind him of himself and his past. But the city, or the landscape itself, can also be a living organism for the individual (Assmann, 2004). This is why the spatial frames of memory, in the inhabited space, are of paramount importance. Emphasis is placed on the material world surrounding the self, the physical environment, as they have an identity-forming and identity-creating function, which can make them symbols and serve as a reference point for memory. Following Jan Assmann's line of thought, it can be stated that memory uses spaces and places as symbols, semiotising them and using them as spatial metaphors (Assmann, 2004). Urban and geographical spaces are also political, cultural and social reflexions. Just as memory does not preserve the past as such, neither does the cityscape or the landscape, but only

what society is willing to reconstruct or what it can confront. The reconstruction and transformation of the past is constantly taking place under the influence of the present.

The city and space define us, as they can become symbolic and create personal and collective identities, and thus write the subject. For Tokarczuk, the focus is on the countryside because the countryside has always had a kind of fundamental melancholy: the disappearing space and discourse. Theories of space are also theories of the subject, for example, the city as a vehicle of social factors and as a landscape of human relations and memories (Bókay, 2006). Space is also a constituent of the subject, the subject also embraces spatiality. Space is linked to instincts, desires, goals, power, emotions and actions, all of which affect the life of the individual. For example, the spaces, buildings, structures and textures of the city become part of the individual's sense of space. (Faragó, 2006) For Tokarczuk, the house symbolises isolation, retreat, protection and shelter. It gives the illusion of stability to the individual, for whom the house is interpreted as a representation of the centre of the world. The house is a spatial representation, a projection of social crisis and historical epochs. In other words, the city has its own vocabulary and language, reflected in its buildings and spaces (Szalewska, 2014). In addition, I would like to add that it is also possible to interpret the city, which has been damaged many times by historical events and the signs on its surface have different symbolic meanings, from the point of view introduced and used by the corporeal narratology. Through the traces left behind (crumbling houses, empty streets), the nation and the individual in it experience the destruction and relive the memories evoked by the object. For example, in the selected novel, the houses of Nowa Ruda (formerly inhabited by Germans), are open wounds on the surface, eternally reminding us of the past and cultural heritage of the German minority (e.g. their architectural habits, their work ethic). The Poles who moved in to replace the Germans (after 1945) could not cultivate the land in the same way and the environment was left to decay. The houses and the objects found in them, the traces of the Germans, evoke a bygone world, but are a constant reminder of the foreignness of the settlers and the broken cultural continuity. The settlers are Poles who left the old Polish lands after the war, left the eastern territories (Belarus and Lithuania, occupied by the Soviets) and then occupied the western parts of Poland, moving into the homes of Germans, who were deported from Poland to German territories.

The buildings, with their concrete weight, give access to hidden traumas and wounds, and speak through memories in literary representation. Kornélia Faragó's theory also supports the appropriateness of drawing parallels with corporeal narratology. The aforementioned literary historian explains that the characters' interpretations of their bodies are also subject to the modification rhythm of spatial reflections. Corporeal (corporeally real) reflection cannot avoid the spatiality of the body, the spatial-structural interpretation of the body. Space is the medium in which the body is realised as body. And the cultural medium is of paramount importance in interpreting the corporeal conditionality of space (Faragó, 2006). It is an interesting parallel that, according to Tokarczuk, people are structured internally like houses: rooms, atria correspond to the individual chambers and passages of the body. Furthermore, the furnishings of houses reflect people's personalities, and when you enter a house, it is as if you are entering the body and thoughts of

another. Marta's house is also like the old wig-wearing woman: it lacks the possibility of the future and turns the past into objects. There is only one moment in it, the "now", the infinite and omnidirectional present.

In Joanna Bator's novel *Sand Hill*, Wałbrzych and the Sand Hill panel monster take centre role. The whole town is dominated by the smell of coal dust and the communist period to which it owes its rise. This Lower Silesian town, once inhabited by Germans, was filled with foreigners after 1945, who moved into the houses of the now displaced Germans and came from distant parts of Poland as part of the population exchange programme (the same historical thread is also developed in *Tokarczuk*.) Many foreigners arrive, robbed of their roots by the Second World War, but willing to build a new Poland in the hope of a different life. At the same time, the inhabitants of Wałbrzych have no memories of the past, or dare not face up to it, and those who have lost their roots are unable to connect with the new space and are greeted only by hopelessness. In essence, we get a historical overview from the World War through communism to the turnaround of the regime. The city of Wałbrzych has two faces: on the one hand, an industrial centre on the surface, and on the other, a real mining town underground, with endless corridors of black water and no idea what lies beneath. Bator has a digging motif, as does *Tokarczuk*, as everyone is constantly digging, either for coal or to find objects hidden by the former German population, which they believe to be treasure. In Bator, the motif of the panel within the city is central, as the monster on the sandhill means different things to each of the three female figures: for Zofia, inaccessible; for Jadzia, paradise on earth; for Dominika, a stifling, repulsive environment. Each woman wants to live a life different from the one her mother has shown or handed down. For Jadzia, the dream under communism was when they were allocated an apartment in a new housing estate, which even had district heating. For Dominika, this environment was strangler and abrasive.

To illustrate the interpretation of the city's squares, it is worth staying with Bator's novel, where the park was still a central meeting place, a place for conversation and walking, where Jadzia and Stefan could be safe, but it became increasingly dangerous due to attacks and robberies. Dominika no longer likes walking there and is afraid that drunk men (including her father Stefan) will destroy the harmony of the place. It also shows that the city's spaces are not used equally by its inhabitants. For example, when Jadzia first arrived at the town's train station, she felt ashamed at the pub by the station because she had never been alone in such a place before, while the men confidently measured and dominated the space. But equally at the park, a dangerous area for children and women, while for the drunks who dominated it, it was a place to let off steam. Dominika was born in the city and takes for granted the way she participates in urban social life, while her mother and grandmother had to learn to do so. For Dominika, Wałbrzych represents anxiety and a desire for more, not the sight of mines and chimneys, or the desire to spy on her neighbours as the other residents do. He would rather be nomadic than live in a place he doesn't feel is his own.

Wounded cities

It is interesting that Tokarczuk's novel bears in its title the duality that characterises the world of the text, the atmosphere of the elusive and transitory states between waking and dreaming, day and night, present and past. This duality also symbolises the two-faced nature of the world. On the one hand, the "day house" is a geographically delimited world of reality. The house is the building where people's daily lives take place and, together with its surroundings, it represents home. On the other hand, the "night house" has no specific title, it is a world of dreams, of the elusive. The dualism and simultaneous existence of the two define our reality. We live in both the day house and the night house, remembering night dreams during the day, which act as a bridge connecting the two worlds. As the title suggests, the central motif is the house, which is a specific location, since the narrator and his partner move to Nowa Ruda, a small Silesian town on the border between the Czech Republic and Poland, to spend the period from March to November. But the real setting exists in the text only to provide a basis for the mystery and the world of dreams. The phrase 'house at night' in the title refers to this. On the other hand, the house is a symbolic image that encapsulates the past and present of the whole region. In fact, it is the imaginary Lower Silesian town of Pietno and its surroundings that becomes the protagonist of the story. After 1945, the village in the depths of the picturesque Kłodzko Valley was almost completely deserted. Because of its particular location, the sun is invisible from October to March, as it is surrounded by the Dry Mountains to the east and south and the Włodzica hills to the west. The grey and lightless winter season gives the settlement a mystical atmosphere. The history of this small village, isolated from the world, is presented with a magical realism and a naturalistic touch, but this dual representation allows the problems to be explored: the grey reality of the Polish People's Republic is revealed, as are the subconscious human fears and desires. In the novel, it is impossible to break out of Nowa Ruda voluntarily, because every attempt results in failure and disappointment, as is evident in Krysia's search for love. The region keeps its victims and does not let them go, for example, Marek Marek could not leave the house of horrors or Ergo Sum returns after the vicissitudes of war or the German population, once displaced, returns as aging tourists. The former German inhabitants returning as tourists also find and are only captured by the empty plots of land.

Public places in the town or city make us feel a certain way and the sight of them triggers certain memories to surface. Referring to Jacques Derrida's interpretation of the city, Jolán Orbán points out that the city is a carrier of memory and promise, but not from the perspective of the present, but from a historical perspective, which is why it becomes open in space and time. They are talking cities that become repositories of memory through their 'traumatic architecture', their woundedness (Orbán, 2004). Both Tokarczuk and Bator maintain the perspective of perpetual motion in their novels, namely by creating the border subject. These characters want to experience the possibility of breaking out of boundaries. But in the novels it is impossible to break out of one's enclosing space voluntarily, because every attempt results in failure and disappointment, as is clearly visible in Delimitation is part of the means of control of power, and crossing borders is not possible,

even dead, because one is still trapped within borders, as we saw in the case of the German tourist Peter Dieter.

It is worth examining the phenomenon of post-industrialisation in the post-communist post-1989 region, which is also present in novels. The change of regime brought the much sought-after freedom, but it also brought to the surface a number of previously repressed grievances, losses and traumas, which led to a lack of identity, an identity crisis and the emergence of new inequalities. To explore these gaps, it is useful to approach them from the perspective of hanthology¹. Every space is saturated with missing presences, non-functional buildings, and parts that have become playgrounds for deviant social factors. The ruins must be taken into account, as they are an imprint of social, political and historical phenomena. But they are neither dead, nor present, nor living, but intermediate non-places (Horváth & Lovász, 2017). Memory is fixed to a place, but the place is permeable and transparent to power, it can be controlled, but the deterioration renders power inoperable because heterogeneity is restored. Abandoned sites have been symbolically erased from the social field and have hidden meanings. The silence of the ruin confronts us with the impermanent presence of historical traumas and influences the individual with its disturbing remains, because it makes the possibility of shame permanent and makes us aware of the broken. The ruin is also the bearer of rescued stories, a place of memory that expresses the fragility of life tending towards destruction. It is a survivor with a story to tell, but no time or audience to hear it (Hirsch, 2011). At the same time, the ruin is also an uncontrolled space, it belongs to no one and its emptiness cannot be integrated or controlled.

In the wounded landscapes by traumas, ruins speak through their silence, through their unspoken traces of memory, their implied meanings and their unsettling atmosphere. In Tokarczuk's novel, the images of ruin are outlined through the presentation of the sights of Pietno and Nowa Ruda. Marta's friend Agnieszka lives on the hill above Pietno and she has a view of the whole settlement, from her perspective we see the present situation. „She saw the drunk men and the wandering children. She saw the women pulling trees down the hill on their wobbly legs. probably they were also drunk. (...) Shee looked at the stream full of duck droppings, the shadows cast over the whole village, the cats with their fur falling out, the broken machines, the old trails with their broken hair.” (Tokarczuk, 2014. 52.p.) With the disappearance of the communist regime's workplaces, thousands of people became unemployed and suddenly found themselves out of work as the change came, so for many, alcohol was a source of solace. The image of broken machinery may also be a reference to the once working economy. From the description, it is clear that the village is in a terrible state and that total hopelessness defines the lives of its inhabitants. Peter Dieter experiences a similar situation when he returns to his village. Peter did not recognise his village because there were no houses, no yards, no roads, no bridges, and the village was reduced to a skeleton and a few houses, almost deserted. He

¹ Hanthology: A cultural and artistic movement that emerged in the early 2000s and consists of works that build on traces of the past. They function as a medium that allows the past to be experienced and the rememberers to express themselves. Hanthology refers to the crisis of both space and time.

had an image about the town in his memory and clearly, memories and feelings are connected. Remembering means to have been involved something, perhaps he had dreams about his childhood and when he confronted with reality, the idealised bubbles of memory burst, and suddenly he couldn't deal with the ruins left behind, the non-places that haunted. The childhood's memories and the places of memories made him who he was. But he could not find a grip on his own past, his roots and his inner personality. The town's landscape has changed, he could not deal with the transformation, because he felt that his old memories are fake and didn't have the real places where they were belonging. But Peter didn't recognize the transformation from old into new always involves negotiation, the old is never really gone, it is always present, yet he could not find it. People moved to nearby larger towns in the hope of better housing and living conditions and to enjoy the benefits of modernisation. The characters in the novel are purposeless, merely vegetating and unable to realise their dreams. They are trapped in a vortex of the past and their own histories, or in the endless present. The narrator is no different from them, we do not know her past and no real information about her present situation or goals is revealed, she is like an empty vessel filled with the stories of others.

Like photographs, the ruins also function as an umbilical cord, as they can link the memories of the first and second generations. They show what is no longer there, but they also represent what was, a life that no longer exists, but still goes on (Hirsch, 2011). They are pieces of different stories, pointing towards a larger narrative. Yet their story cannot be encapsulated in a linear narrative, because it is defined by the in-between, and therefore overtly untold, just as in Tokarczuk's case, the narrator does not reveal the history of the region in a linear way. (Horváth & Lovász, 2017) Marta stays on the edge, observing and editing the story threads as she puts together the wigs, mostly listening and observing as a soul-measurer, and her main activity is to see, perceive and preserve. She will symbolically delegate this task, this chosen position, to the narrator by making for her a wig that fits him completely. The wig-maker embodies Polish folk wisdom, and her figure is highly mystical, as is her disappearance at the end of the novel. It seems as if Marta is a fusion of ancient parks, a goddess of fate who washes and cuts the threads of people's lives, symbolised by the wigmaker. In Marta's idea, hair is the guardian and repository of thoughts, and therefore the wig-making process involves carefully weaving together the right thoughts and giving them to the right person. It's like handing over a repository of memories. Marta takes care of Pietno, acting in a kind of caretaker capacity, ensuring that the past is constantly revisited by bringing back memories, that it does not become irrelevant, and delegating this key task to the narrator.

Non-places functioning as a crypt

In the case of the memorial trace, if it remains an uncharted place, even in the form of a ruin, similar mechanisms can be observed as those that Derrida draws attention to in his analysis of the crypt concept. The crypt is a place of absence, but at the same time it guards, watches, hides and recalls as an eternal memento. It creates a kind of false, artificial consciousness in the divided self, a non-natural space, which it creates by isolating it with partitions (Derrida, 2021). It creates an inward-facing, closed and secret space that

keeps out all intruders. This space is one foot in the past or one foot in the future, but always in the time of the dislocated. The dislocated suspension in time is stretched somewhere between yesterday, unable to end, and tomorrow, unable to begin. Somewhere in the Self it keeps itself safe, occupying some secret place. The crypt blurs neither the present nor the past, but precisely the boundary between the two. It is always repressed, but returns regularly and the cultural images of the past haunt the present. These repressions return because they cannot find their place in the fabric of tradition of the Self. What is haunted is not quite present, it does not exist in itself, it exists only in what no longer exists or in relation to what does not yet exist. This kind of haunting resists the constriction and homogenisation of time and space. They are remote forces that have a causal effect without being physically present, for example, through traumatic memories of the past acting in a psychoanalytic way. A fundamental experience is temporal claustrophobia, which is a locked in a future-less present dominated by forms of fear of the undead past (Zemlényi-Kovács, 2020).

The crypt was created by force, by some trauma, some loss, and is destined to remain silent, an indelible mark embedded within the Self. The Self, however, tries to identify with the object it has incorporated (incorporated) and awaits re-formation, but the process is not successful and something alien remains in the Self (Derrida, 2021). Incorporation is a kind of magical incorporation, healing, in which we imagine swallowing the loss, so we also refuse to process and own the lost for fear that it will transform us through processing. Incorporation is in fact a repression, a "refusal to introject loss." (Ábrahám & Török, 1998, p.17) But the longer it is kept in itself, the longer the process of exclusion takes place, so the crypt is also a place of silence, and what is remembered is not the object itself, but its exclusion from the introjection, like a monument. The Self has created the crypt within itself as an external safe, a kind of non-place that has a function similar to that of a winter ruin. In this exteriority, in this non-place, the mechanisms of containment and rescue are important (Derrida, 2021). The crypt contains the traumas that are also responsible for the failure of the introjection. Incorporation is also a cryptic phenomenon in the sense that it hides behind the normal, among the characteristics (Ábrahám & Török, 1998). It is as if in Tokarczuk's novel it is Marta who holds the key to the crypt of Nowa Ruda and Pietno, and slowly, thread by thread, like the mushroom threads cited several times, the repressed, unprocessed tragedies, losses and memories that have not been made part of a collective identity are unravelled. The fungus motif appears several times in the stories and is always presented as a source of danger that can bring death and end life in minutes. The narrator admits that she would like to be like a mushroom because mushrooms are insensitive and can cover the whole earth, they grow anywhere they can get moisture and some species of mushrooms can hypnotise you with their smell, making you stupefied. The main character can imagine his existence as a giant cold mycelium. The mycelium is a collection of fungal filaments, a web of fungal threads that form the part of the fungi that permeates the soil, and the filaments are capable of continuous growth, i.e. they can expand, so they have infinite space and 'power'. The web of the mycelium also wants to become the threads of stories, the set of spores from which the various mystical stories feed and cover the whole world. And at the origin of all this is the narrator, who

has all the story threads concentrated and has a view of the world, but remains apathetic and impassive, and thus observes the flow of things. Tragedies, losses and memories, these threads of history are unravelled at a time when the walls have been shaken, when the historical and cultural space has been transformed by the change of regime. The collective memorial has so far been a tomb that preserved the traumas of the community, an unspoken weight on the lives and destinies of the characters, and the self has been forced to take on the role of a secret-keeping undertaker, unable to face up to its own past or that of its family (Ábrahám & Török, 1998). The fate of these actors shows that they are unable to rebirth themselves, to seize opportunities and to break out of the region. The past is present in their personalities as a piece of reality condemned to denial, but the unspoken, buried alive memories destroy the subjects from within.

An interesting storyline in Tokarczuk's novel is when the narrator first met Taki-a-Taki, when he asked the protagonist for a drink, but noticed the drawing of the blue-eyed guardian dragon on the wall of the house. It is the sight of this picture that unfolds the story of the Beast. Earlier, in the days after the Second World War, after the Germans had been deported, a monster roamed the neighbourhood. The monster hunted chickens, ducks and geese. Residents were determined to kill it, but their various attempts were to no avail. The authorities were busy setting up a new system of land distribution and cooperatives. But once a woman was dragged to the bottom of the lake by the monster, and the authorities could not stand by and watch. Eventually the whole lake was blown up and the monster died. The monster embodies the guilt of the Polish population, both for their role in the Holocaust and for their complicity in the deportation of the Germans. It is the monster that emerged from the crypt of memory, who held the population in terror as a punishment for their failure to come to terms with the past, and its killing is therefore symbolic, because by exterminating it the population is trying to get rid of the past and to follow strategies of forgetting and selective memory.

Conclusion

The paper has first outlined the theoretical framework that is essential to the treatment of the topic, and has examined the interrelationship between history, literature and memory. I then tried to outline, through selected literary examples, some more pragmatic analytical possibilities that shed light on the ways of processing the past. Furthermore, in the novels highlighted, it was emphasised that memory is geographically determined and that landscape and settlement play an important role, because space is always embedded in memories of past events and identity is strongly linked to geographical locations. The different stories that are presented are like pieces of a puzzle that, when put together, make sense of the whole. By fitting the pieces together, we can see a panorama of 20th-century Polish history, and in it the evolution of the destinies of individuals. The selection of literary texts is not systematic or representative, but is intended to be an initiative that can be continued and extended in further research. The aim of the broader research is to find a common intersection in the representation of the topic in contemporary Polish and Hungarian women's literature and to compare the results with how historical and social science research reflects on the period under study.

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