

The uncanny space of “lesser” Europe: trans-border corpses and transnational ghosts in post-1989 Eastern European fiction

Dorota Kolodziejczyk
Wrocław University, Poland

The transition period in Eastern Europe after 1989 was distinguished by the exigency of settling scores with the communist past. This tendency was reflected in the literature of that period¹ which mobilised a revisionary imagination engaged in an effort to retrieve the local as a site of vernacular history and knowledge. The process of re-discovering the local (which was often concomitant with imagining the local out of non-existence) helped to excavate muted, obliterated and buried forms of a multicultural past. The new fiction resonated with a radical historical and historiographic debate about the content and representation of the past in regions that had never succumbed to the official model of a homogenous nation promoted by the socialist state. These regions had featured in literature for a significant period of time,² but always as peripheries of Europe and modernity—a double lack collateral with the perceived difference of lived folk cultures, pre-capitalist agrarian economies and trade routes exterior to the main itinerary of world capitalism. In pre-World War Two fiction, the tendency was to present the multicultural and multiethnic mosaic of these regions, especially of the border territories, in a nostalgic mode. In the aftermath of World War Two, the pluralist histories of Eastern European states underwent almost total erasure, occasioned by shifted state borders, the Holocaust and extermination of the Romas, the transfer of Germans on the basis of the Yalta conference and the Potsdam treaty, and the enforced dispersal of minorities into new territories in order to prevent their reconsolidation into communities. All of these factors were crucial in implementing an ideology of the mono-national state, redefining national minorities (where these remained) as decorative folk embroidery on the fabric of the nation. The accepted meaning of the local and regional was a direct result of the strict policing of the civic body under the ideology of a mononational state and its centripetal politics.

Post-1989 fiction: mythic homelands, haunted histories

The eradication of minorities from the discourse of the state, however, which was a logical appendage of the regime’s centrist politics, produced a counter-effect of haunting—an intimation of the presence of the denied Other which manifested itself in state/Party paranoia about the conspiring internal Other,³ as well as in multiple, more or less latent forms of remembering the obliterated multiethnic and multicultural past in film or literature. After 1989, the memory of the

lost Other erupted across prose genres, feature films and documentaries. Re-membering seems to have been a precondition for investing the present of the transition period with meaning in the face of historical ruptures and discontinuities that have left post-communist societies deeply traumatised and in need of a newly articulated identity. The turn to the local in post-1989 fiction was one of the many ways to take part in contemporary discussions about collective and private memory and about how these might open up new, post-national topographies of belonging. This fiction represents the local as a site of forgotten, erased or exterminated difference and vernacularity. It develops a wavering form that combines solid archival knowledge⁴ with narrative fabulation⁵ and uses devices such as intertextual play, metafictional and self-reflexive intrusion, inter-generic hybridization, and other strategies of disenchantment to disrupt otherwise enchanting, magical fictions of reinvented localism. What started as a new thematic focus in fiction developed into a novelistic subgenre that has been branded as writing of the “mythic homelands” (Czapliński 357).

In a comparative reading of two novels, *House of Day, House of Night* by Polish writer Olga Tokarczuk (*Dom dzienny, dom nocny*, 1998), and *The Twelve Rings* by Ukrainian writer Juri Andruhovych (*Dwanadtsiat' obruchiv*, 1996), this article examines representations of the mystique of the local that adumbrates the officially expunged alien element, and considers ways in which the seemingly nostalgic rediscovery of peripheral place engenders a vivid dialogue with modernity and the globalized present of the “world in pieces” (Geertz 91). In both novels, the uncanny content of the local is revealed as an intrusion of the ghost or the dead body of an exterminated, forgotten, or exiled other that disturbs the stability of borders between temporalities, spaces, languages, histories and identities. For both authors, the ghost/corpse figures a rupture in history that reverses the meaning of the local, from the safety of belonging to uncertainty. Anxieties about uprooting are the result of shifting state borders due to the collapse of Russian, Habsburg and Ottoman empires followed by the outcome of World War Two (especially the Holocaust and the post-Yalta border and population shifts). The local (the provincial town or region) seemingly removed from the mainstream current of modern history, bears indelible marks of history’s sweeping passage. Once representative of vernacular traditions accrued from centuries of multiethnic coexistence, these locations are now emptied of their cultural substance. The resulting void becomes the main object of inquiry in novels of this period. The fiction of localism exemplified by the two novels under discussion here is a generic category thus premised on a poetics of return, via a narrator who is a departed inhabitant, a new arrivant, and/or an intertextual tourist and poacher. A second key feature is an ambiguous attitude to the local and to the nostalgia of belonging it evokes, as such nostalgia can prompt escapist sentimental journeys, or because the local in its inherent cultural multiplicity has been an object of nationalist appropriation, or because belonging is inherently a fraught concept, as the history of the region testifies. The third feature of the novel of localism is that peripheral

spaces are inscribed within colonial, imperial and post-imperial contexts, persisting in contemporary currents of globalization as the loitering legacy of lesser Europe. Czesław Miłosz in his *Native Realm* captures this sense of otherness in relation to European modernity: the borderland territory is defined there in terms of the “frontiers of the West,” “foggy expanses,” a “mixture of languages, religions, and traditions,” and as Europe’s “poor relation” (2-3).

The turn to regionalism in the cultural politics of this transitional period can be seen as a strategy aimed at reconciling a turbulent twentieth-century history with the present. The breakthrough of 1989 brought a new wave of transborder bilateral revisions of history that had productive effects on the local scale. The new cultural investment in regionalism stimulated the opening up of collective and individual testimonies deposited in the history of border shifts that took place in the aftermath of World War Two. These accounts of the encounter include striking stories of uprooting, estrangement and displacement, but, most importantly, overwhelming and mutual fear of the other. Yet, since such stories did not conform to the official discourse of the mononational socialist state, they remained private, stored in family archives. They could enter the broader public awareness via film, journalism, autobiographical writing and fiction only after 1989, and they did so in the form of a distinctively post-memory poetics. The fiction of localism engages second-generation explorations of family stories where memories become subject to imaginary reconstructions and the immediacy of witnessing is obfuscated by layers of mediating discourses and realities: the coercive nationalism of the communist state, the mythic prominence of the pre-World War Two borderland, and the alienation of forcefully resettled populations. These mediations form palimpsestic layers that the writer has to peel off to get to the core memory of uprooting and resettlement. What s/he discovers is that the experience of displacement that defines Central and Eastern European post-war identities releases a permanent sense of haunting.

The new fiction of localism was itself haunted by its literary predecessors—the masterful representation of the complex cultural and national mosaic of the interwar Polish “borderland” by Stanisław Vincenz and Czesław Miłosz was deemed inimitable both artistically and discursively.⁶ Any new fictional conceptualization of the local as border space of transnational histories and intercultural encounters had to respond to this tradition of borderland writing. Thus the category of mythic homelands in fiction of localism after 1989 refers to the existing literary construct of the homeland which, in the new fiction, retained its spectral presence, standing both for a concrete location to re-present and for a master text to be critically assessed, rewritten and re-evaluated. That is why the significance of the fiction of localism lay not so much in re-creating (whether epigonically or innovatively) mythic homelands, but in challenging, even whilst seeming nostalgically to replicate, the very processes of mythicization that would constitute the homeland as an organic vernacular space. Indeed, the borderland myth of peaceful multicultural coexistence played a crucial role in the revival of regionalism in literary and cultural

production after 1989. It provided an ethical framework of a multicultural heritage for new representations of the local in other geographical and historical contexts. Opening up the local as an inherently transnational space enabled a new and radical intervention into historical traumas on all sides of historical divides (Polish-German, Polish-Ukrainian, Romanian-Hungarian, Slovakian-Hungarian and so on). Crucially, writing from post-communist countries that had for decades existed under the ideology of national homogeneity has brought forth a unique transcultural and transnational sensibility that interrogates both the multicultural myth of the past and the global realities of the new, post-Iron Curtain Europe.

Spectres of Eastern Europe: borderland narratives into transcultural aesthetics

Olga Tokarczuk's novel represents one of the best examples of a fiction of localism in 1990s Polish literature. Juri Andrukhovych's writing, particularly his *Twelve Rings*, also belongs to the trend, not least because the author locates the plot of this novel in the Eastern Carpathians, the Hutsul region, one of the most famous "mythic homeland" locations in the interwar borderland narratives. Andrukhovych, moreover, invests in the complexities of the post-Soviet Ukrainian search for identity and a sense of belonging—manifesting itself in an awareness of coming from a place distinct in its character and history, as well as in an ironic distancing from the temptations of national myths.⁷ His effort is staked against decades of Soviet centrist politics preoccupied with erasing local communities and vernaculars. Exploring provincial settings, where the ghostly presence of the past overshadows the present, these authors revisit the tradition of reflection on Central and Eastern Europe as Europe's margin, as an indeterminate space of difference, as a vague reminiscence of something not fully revealed, formed or embodied, as a Europe yet to come and as a spectral promise of the always deferred future.

Critical reflection on Eastern Europe as the other side of European modernity has by now generated a range of categories, opening up the region to theoretically charged comparative study. One of these recent works, *Narratives of the European Border: A History of Nowhere* by Richard Robinson, rather typically implicates Central and Eastern Europe in the poetics of no-place. Drawing on key authors writing about and/or from Central and Eastern Europe,⁸ Robinson defines the region summatively as the realm of the fictive and the fantastic borderland: "a blank space on to which images can be projected, a more baleful zero-degree zone of nullity or alternatively an over-determined dream-space where fantasy and allegory can be given a home" (3). Although Robinson seems rather oddly to combine orientalizing fascination with a postcolonial engagement that admits that the "European borderland" is a direct product of centuries of colonial power relations exerted in the region (9), the acknowledgement that these territories, constituting Europe's internal other subject to persistent semiosis, can be placed alongside related

assumptions by Maria Todorova, Slavoj Žižek, Michał Buchowski and others.⁹

The fiction of localism manifests a heightened awareness of such exotic appropriations of the border space and Eastern Europe as a whole, and returns the othering gaze of the West in a self-conscious, invariably ambiguous and parodic manner. The border becomes much more than a geographical category. It is, rather, a spatialized narrative process developing as a complex network of relations across divisions: historical (modes of writing down events that render conflicting interpretations, especially across state borders), temporal (modern/pre/postmodern), ideological, economic (capitalist, socialist, transitional), and imperial (Soviet/post-Soviet, post-communist). As such, it is an epitome of the Bakhtinian threshold chronotope¹⁰ representing a transitory state of wavering, in-betweenness and transformation. It is in this manner that Madina Tlostanova proposes we reinterpret the border chronotope at work in fiction produced in cultures marked by “coloniality of power,” a category she applies after Quijano and Ennis, and Mignolo,¹¹ to the cultures of the ex-Soviet empire. The border chronotope is “characterized by in-betweenness, the protean nature, the constant state of transit, non-finality, parallel deterritorialization and dehistoricization ... thus defining a possible territory of transcultural fiction” (Tlostanova 406). This territory is dominated by themes of transit and difference where the border chronotope denotes neither a border in the geo-political sense (as in the border of the state), nor literal transit (as in migration). It indicates, rather, a topography of liminal, transitory states. Difference in transcultural fiction manifests itself less as a substance than as flux and multivocality. It is a transforming passage through a border epitomized by translation: “the problem of cultural translation and untranslatability acquires a specific meaning because it is not always connected with a clear juxtaposition of linguistic and even epistemic models” (Tlostanova 207). Translatability requires an uninterrupted link between existential stages of the character in transit, while transit itself, represented in the border chronotope, disrupts such a continuity. Cultural translation, then, seems to be a surrender to untranslatability, rendering transcultural fiction one of the most radical cases of Bakhtinian heteroglossia.

Although Tlostanova refers specifically to writers from the former USSR (now the Commonwealth of Independent States), her elaboration of comparative and transcultural uses of the border chronotope is critically relevant to Central and Eastern European literatures, retaining an especial relevance for the fiction of localism in which transcultural and transnational mobilities meet the pressures of contemporary globalization. A distinct sense of estrangement characterizing representations of the local, stemming from ruptures in social and historical continuity, intimates an uncanny presence that introduces in these fictions a sense of unhomeliness. The border chronotope serves to articulate estrangement as a splintering in the social and cultural construction of homeliness. Place becomes a site of border identities and histories not because it is located on or close to

the historically shifting borders of Central and Eastern European states, but in terms of sedimented transcultural and transnational movement and exchange. The estrangement dramatized in the two novels by the haunting presence of the ghost/corpse ensues from a tiered temporal distribution of transcultural encounters, since the two elements of the encounter exist within discontinuous temporal layers. What the process of revisiting/reinventing the place unravels is that the substance of the lost vernacular is itself made up of difference. The otherworldliness of the ghost enforces a remembrance of other languages, ethnic communities and homeland landscapes.

However, given the poetics of untranslatability at play in the fiction of localism, such remembering is amnesiac and translation necessarily fails. The uncanny processes of doubling and repetition at work in retrieval turn writing into ghosting. The ghost, either in the form of an apparition or an untold story, disturbs the temporal continuity of place. It is the materialised form of national hauntology: “a presence that comes back from the past to generate a promise about the future” (Cooppan 17). The present is not able to remember the past of the place; dictionaries—historical archives—are incomplete; the original is lost, together with the vernaculars of shifted populations. The ghost, however, is not entirely of the past. It returns, imprinting the positivity of the present with its haunting images; it becomes the future rather than a memory, a paradox of the new that returns, often literally, home.

As failed but necessary translation across cultures and histories, the fiction of localism is then a practice of spectrality. It is driven by a pressing need to complement the living present of place with what has been denied as self and returns as spectral other. “Spectrality does not involve the conviction that ghosts exist or that the past (and maybe even the future they offer to prophesy) is still very much alive and at work, within the living present; all it says, if it can be thought to speak, is that the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be” (Cheah 38-39). In the fiction of border spaces of Central and Eastern Europe, haunting occurs where home and exile are coexistent, mutually causal and coeval (Robinson 5). It is precisely the visibility and/or palpability of the other as a shadowy double—the home as the mark of exile, one’s own and another’s—that inscribes the fiction of localism within spectrology. I propose to define it as an investment in undoing oppositions that prevail in haunted ontologies (and are figured as ghosts), and an ethics of the retrieval of lost knowledge: “the ethical task is to give the ghost back to its proper body” (Ghosh 208).

Such recuperation (reincarnation, resurrection) of the immaterial to the material world, marked by the restoration of the lost vernacular to the history and the present of the local, echoes the manifestly postcolonial ethos that Bishnupriya Ghosh sees at work in Amitav Ghosh’s fiction. This is particularly striking with regards to the vernacular idiom as crucial resource for postcolonial historiographies (Ghosh 200); literary practice as an endeavor aimed at archival reconstruction of alternative—sidetracked, forgotten, silenced—histories (Ghosh 203-205); and, most importantly, the ethics of

remembering that fiction imaginatively enacts. Spectrology as an ethics of remembering and recuperation characteristic of postcolonial sensibility resonates powerfully with Central and Eastern European fictions of localism, asserting the affinity of the region to the postcolonial project.

Transborder corpses—the spectral other comes back home. Olga Tokarczuk's *House of Day, House of Night* (1998) is a novel set in Lower Silesia, a region in south-western Poland that throughout the centuries was Polish, Czech, Austrian, Prussian, German and then Polish again. This complex history is both echoed in the novel and discarded so as to reclaim the region from its overdetermination by national histories in mutual conflict and to reassert a vernacular idiom in which places have at least two names. Accordingly, individual life stories are complemented by their doubles, which relate to the same location, but in a different language. This foreign vernacular traced through the narrative structure that transgresses temporal and geographical borders is represented as the repressed other emerging spectrally—the subaltern double of the palpable object world of the contemporary provincial town of Nowa Ruda (Neurode) and surrounding villages.

The town's borderland location between three states and several national histories determines the episodic organization of the narrative, structured by subtly linked discontinuities. This departure from chronology, and by extension imaginative fabulation of the region's history, provides the basis for a poetics of spectrality. The haunting other thoroughly permeates the text. The region's history is retold through a half-cited, half-imaginatively reconstructed biography of the local transgendered saint Kummernis. An authorless text found at the local *bric-a-brac* shop is woven into another life-story, that of a transsexual monk Paschalis, who compiles the saint's biography from the writings she left. Perhaps needless to say, the cult of the saint is local and illicit, not officially recognized by religious authorities. Yet the text is purchased at the local sanctuary of Saint Mary, whose cult is officially endorsed, showing that legitimate and illicit cults coexist in the contradictory logic of the borderland. The motive of the local saint, banned and lost in historical oblivion, becomes the master-code for the lost vernacular of the region. In the novel's narrative framework, it endures transhistorically and transnationally in a succession of stories within stories. This transhistorical, spectral subalternity prevails despite the historical rupture brought about by massive displacements of populations across new state borders at the end of World War Two. The novel narrates this period through the overlapping episodes of the departure of the Germans and arrival of the Poles.

The crushing effect history has on the integrity of the local, uprooting and dislocating whole populations, anchors the narrative in *House of Day, House of Night* in a radical disjunction. In a way strictly related to the spectral resilience of the other, the uprooting process represented in the novel marks the beginning of the end of the modern history of nation-states. Departees and arrivants are united in one

experience of dislocation in which the new surroundings remain alien. But they belong to the last generation of located people, even if this location is for them only a projection of memory. For the generations that come next, a sense of belonging can only be frail and confused, because it comprises not only familial memories of the lost home, as in Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory (Hirsch 22), but also unfamiliar intimations of the other living a ghostly existence in the place now home to a different national and local community. While the new arrivants nurture their sense of exile and painful unhomeliness in the new place, the next generation has to open up to the double unfamiliarity of their home. The post-memory logic of their generational experience is ambivalent: while the familial/familiar gets estranged and distanced in the process of mediation, the unfamiliar—the spectral presence of the foreign vernacularity permeating the place—loses the status of a threatening otherness and becomes an object of retrieval. *House of Day, House of Night* is then a post-dislocation, post-memory novel, in which the local is made up of conflicting processes of remembering, obliteration and retrieval that require narrative techniques capable of rendering the uncanny sense of unfamiliarity of what is intimately one's "own" place. The tenacity and sensory vividness of memories that the Polish arrivants and the German departees hold on to prove that for the displaced, the home dwells utterly in the imaginary.

The local is therefore, in an appropriately paradoxical sense, an unhomely place. It is haunted by the ghosts of other localities and histories retaining their presence in that apparently most familiar of categories, the house. The house in Tokarczuk's novel is the site of spectral unfamiliarity. In the chapter "Treasure hunting," a search for valuable property left by the Germans starts as looting and turns gradually into the process of acknowledging and reconciling with the alien presence that cannot be eradicated. Items of everyday use, such as toys and household utensils become residual traces of the departed owners:

Sometimes they found simple wooden toys that they gave to their children—after years of war this was a real treasure.... The Germans had left spices, salt-cellars, oil at the bottom of bottles, containers full of buckwheat, sugar and ersatz coffee in sideboards. They had left curtains in the windows, irons on hotplates, pictures on the walls. Bills, rental and sale contracts, christening photos and letters lay about in drawers. Some houses still had books, but they had lost their power of persuasion – the world around them had moved on to another language.... An alien smell lingered in the kitchens and bedrooms.... The women had a special talent for discovering closets no one had noticed, drawers that had been overlooked, and well-hidden shoe-boxes, from which children's milk teeth or locks of hair spilled forth. (243)

Listings and catalogues, frequent in novels of localism, are one of the most striking techniques of retrieving the Other due to their seeming objectivity and factuality. The presence of the lost vernacular is restored literally as an archival proof of its existence. In such an encounter, the Other becomes an intimation of disturbing familiarity. Inhabiting what was called in the official discourse the "post-German"

landscape of the “regained territories” has to involve a process of translation. In *House of Day*, *House of Night*, the language of rental contracts and bills remains foreign and alienates, but intimate “treasures” found by women become a means of translation: where languages do not translate, the object world does. The language that separates people into nations is inevitably an agent of the disjunction process that annihilates the local. But translation happens across this seemingly irreparable rupture and involves a move beyond subjective consciousness into what we might consider the novel’s political unconscious. The objects found by the newly arrived Poles, mostly basic household utensils, are “treasures,” not so much because they have material value for the dispossessed exiles, but because they render the departed owners—the feared other—strangely familiar. The detailed topography of the phenomenal world, where long lists of objects become a register of the spectral presence of the departed Germans, creates a space of intersubjective memory marked by the tropes of timelessness and borderlessness: mushrooms, houses, mountains, wig-weaving. In such spaces, beyond the divisive difference of languages, an individual is only a transient form of being that flows from one consciousness to another, weaving a narrative which endlessly repeats, echoes and doubles its plots and subjects. In this way, the ghost of the obliterated other is ultimately a figure for translation that is as much a process of acknowledging the other as it is an act of appropriation:

Who was the guy who spent his nights changing German names into Polish ones? Sometimes he had a flash of poetic genius, and at other times an awful word-inventing hangover. He did the naming from the start, he created this rugged, mountainous world. He made Nieroda out of Vogelsberg, he patriotically rechristened Gotschenberg with the name Polish Mountain, he turned the melancholy sounding Flucht into the banal Rzędzina, but changed Magdal-Felsen into Bógdał [God-gave]. Why Kirchberg should have become Cerekwica, and Pfeiffenberg Świstak we’ll never guess. (176)

Translation iterates the trope of a transnational ghost, ambivalently caught between languages, histories, bodies and minds. The haunted local will remain a site of ambivalence that is by no means a site of discursive incapacity; conversely, it is accorded an important role in returning the vernacular to its own place (and the ghost to its proper body); of staging the return of the native in the process of translation; and of representing embodied loss in the materiality of the specter.

Post-1989 fiction of localism from Eastern Europe is driven by the same spectrology that Bishnupriya Ghosh regards as underlying the ethical dimension of postcolonial writing, in that it privileges the “historically grounded ghost” (Ghosh 205). In *House of Day*, *House of Night*, the vernacular manifests itself as inherently and spectrally transnational in the ongoing process of translation. In both Tokarczuk’s and Andrukhovych’s texts, the spectrality of the translation process is reinforced by yet another figuration of the border chronotope. This is the transborder corpse—the dead body of the other who terminates his return home across state borders and conflicting histories and brings translation to a puzzling closure.

In *House of Day, House of Night*, Peter Dieter, a German revisiting his native village after decades of living in Germany, is puzzled and worried by his inability to see the landscape of his youth:

The worst moment that day was when Peter Dieter did not recognize his own village. It had shrunk to the size of a hamlet. With houses, backyards, lanes and bridges missing. Only a skeleton of the original village remained. They left the car in front of a padlocked church, behind which Peter's home had once stood among lime trees. (94)

The actual place becomes a disruption of the original he holds in his memory and sees occasionally, especially in travel to completely dissimilar places, as if on a video tape. The Polish incarnation of the village disturbs his projection, because it is too familiar in its difference. Climbing a mountain top, Peter Dieter is finally able to recognize the original landscape outside the transforming, human habitation. At the moment of reconciliation to the local, he dies right across the Polish-Czech border:

The Czech border guards found him as dusk was falling. One of them tried to find a pulse in his wrist, while the younger stared in horror at the brown stream of chocolate trickling from his mouth to his neck. The first one took out his radio and gave the other a quizzical look, then they both glanced at their watches and hesitated....And then, acting in unison, they shoved Peter's leg from the Czech to the Polish side. But that wasn't quite enough for them, because then they gently tugged his whole body northwards into Poland. And, feeling guilty, they went off in silence. [...] Half an hour later the Polish guards' torches lit up Peter. 'Jesus!' cried one of them, recoiling...The Poles looked Peter in the face and whispered to each other. Then, gravely and silently, they took him by the arms and carried him over to the Czech side....So, before his soul departed forever, this was how Peter Dieter remembered his death—as a mechanical movement one way, then the other, like teetering on the edge, like standing on a bridge. (97)

The dead body of the German laid across the Polish-Czech border is grotesquely dismissive of the lines forcefully dividing the landscape he claims as his own. Peter Dieter, as it turns out, comes back home to die. In the absence of the actual building he leaves his dead body in a place he finally recognizes as authentically the one he stored in his memory for decades after exile. The crude objectivity of the body, with its limp weight and immobility, clashes with the imaginary line dividing one space—the mountain and the horizon it draws—into separate states. In comparison with the arbitrariness (and transience, as the region's history testifies) of state borders, the return of the native restores solidity to the place. Peter Dieter's Germanness, a contingent imposition that premised his life on loss and rupture, matters now only to the border guards, engaged in a grotesque deliberation about what to do with the body. Peter Dieter as transborder corpse joins other tropes illustrating the transgressive objecthood of things and challenging the contingency of language with their muteness and stubborn passivity.

Juri Andrukhovych's *The Twelve Rings* (1996) is a characteristically post-historical and post-postmodernist, ultra-parodic novel of the post-Soviet Ukraine. The action takes place in the Hutsul region in the Eastern Carpathians in western Ukraine. The Hutsuls fit ideally into an image of organic locality: they are a local ethnic group

distinguished by a rich folk culture. The Hutsuls are also considered the indigeneous inhabitants of the region, a community predating the nation. This community is also characteristic of the Carpathian ridge, being a hybrid composition of Ukrainian (Ruthenian), Wallachian (Romanian), Hungarian and Polish influences. This part of the Eastern Carpathians has belonged to several states throughout the centuries (the state of Halych-Volhynia; the Polish kings from the 14th century to 1772; in union with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania; the Austrian Empire; the Austro-Hungarian empire; Poland from 1918 to 1939; the Soviet Union; and Ukraine). In the interwar period, the region was subject to the competition between the Polish state, treating the Hutsuls as an ethnographic treasure, and Ukrainian nationalism, which located in them the nation's mythic origins.

In Andrukhovych's novel, the Hutsul mountains are emptied of their indigenous inhabitants. The lack of a local population (mostly departed to Germany as *Gastarbeiters*) questions the legitimacy of the nationalist "blood and soil" mythologization of indigeneity. The nationalist appropriation of the Hutsuls repeats previous appropriations, because nothing in politics and history can be new here. History is portrayed as a succession of violent upheavals erasing prior historical narratives and lines on the map:

this ... could not have happened, if not for the whole chain of fantastic cataclysms, as a result of which in the city of Berlin, far away from the *Dzyndzul polonina* [mountain pasture in the Carpathians], the Wall fell, the geographic map of Eastern Europe underwent quite radical changes in terms of colors, and, here and there, contours. (67)¹²

The landscape retains traces of the past despite all the changes, such as the Habsburg-style railway station (reminiscent, as the narrator notes, in a characteristically metafictional intrusion, of a favourite architectural style of Bohumil Hrabal, of the Habsburg empire), the hammer and sickle bas-relief above it, and a faded coca-cola advertisement. An ancient woman selling tickets, dressed in the local attire worn by all elderly women along the Carpathian ridge, recalls for the narrator a long-lost childhood landscape. These markers of times past successfully compete with history, subsuming it under the timelessness of myth.

One of the protagonists, Karl-Joseph Zumbrunnen, an Austrian photographer fascinated with the Ukraine, seeks in the Hutsul mountains traces of his great-grandfather who, when Galicia basked under the benign sun of the Habsburg empire, planted trees on the bare Hutsul hills:

Nobody remembers him here—wrote Karl-Joseph in his letters—and all my efforts to get to know him are futile. One has an impression that a terrible cataclysm occurred here in the twentieth century, something like an earthquake, and as a result what had happened and taken place before, say, 1939, rapidly fell into the tectonic rift of non-being. (14)

The cataclysmic history and the nostalgic mythologizing gaze of the narrator are of the same narrative order: both inscribe the region in a poetics of obliteration, where everything is synchronous and piled up

randomly like apocalyptic debris. Zumbrunnen arrives in the region with the attitude of a fascinated alien. At the same time, considering his family history, he also returns to his roots and, within the ambiguous logic of post-memory, he is pressured to pursue the obliterated Galician myth and simultaneously to mourn the futility of such a venture.¹³

Into this post-Habsburg, post-Soviet, and definitely post-Hutsul landscape, “somewhere between Galicia and Transylvania, but by no means Pennsylvania” (37), a group of *dramatis personae* arrives in a car marking a sudden intrusion of the ultra-modern: “This is some kind of a jeepoid, or maybe an SUV, something Japanese, American, Singaporean, some kind of a safari, western, action and fiction, in one word, a car of the Western Brand make” (35). The characters are invited by a local business tycoon Vartsabych to spend several days in his resort on the hill Czortopole¹⁴ as a tribute from the people of business to the people of culture. From the very start, the plot is an assemblage of all kinds of narratives making up the post-historical Ukraine. Vartsabych, an always absent *capo di tutti capi*, represents a new group of business oligarchs. His power in the region is absolute, both divine and devilish. It turns out that he owns everything for miles around, down to the smallest item of post-Soviet trash. The onset of capitalism is no less destructive than that of communism: it is a total takeover accompanied by an erasure of the past. The capitalist discourse remains similar to that of the preceding system, but the brotherhood of workers and intelligentsia is substituted by a brotherhood of business and “people of culture.” As part of the planned attractions, a group of filmmakers is to shoot a commercial for Vartsabych’s vodka in the Hutsul folk setting. Two girls dressed in folk attire start in a choreography drawing on the traditional folk dance which develops into an irreverent lesbian orgy set to the beat of global pop. The only significant difference between this appropriation of the Hutsul folk traditions to the needs of the global media and their previous appropriations by nationalist or communist discourses is that this one is entirely non-ideological and for that reason randomly inclusive of everything. Commodification succeeds ideologization, but the fact that the vernacular is subject to appropriating ideologies remains a constant.

One of the invited guests, Artur Pepa, a writer in pursuit of a major literary project that swings from a total vision to an utter sense of futility, browses newspapers bought at random. Their titles span all kinds of political and cultural orientation: from the extreme nationalist “Ultra-Ukrainian” in Ukrainian, to “All Colors of the Rainbow,” considered cosmopolitan due to its gay context and also because it is in Russian, to the local tabloid “Excess.” There is nothing moderately mainstream or normative available any longer, only separate, scattered modes of discursive entities. In this post-ideological and post-historical setting all narratives have equal status: they all are imitations and repetitions. History is no longer an accumulated grand narrative, but a space of chaotically scattered temporal planes. On his walk around the venue at which they are staying, Karl-Joseph

Zumbrunnen's conviction that this part of Europe (indeed, its very center) has collapsed, is only reaffirmed:

Everything he saw made an impression of an odd juxtaposition of epochs, where huge fragments of the old [were] ... forcing out a recollection, clearly getting linked with the present. ... Everything he came across in those rooms, corridors and stairwells bore the stamp of a chimerean co-existence of several object-life layers. (70)

The leftovers of history are now piled up in disarray, resembling a bombed museum or a typically post-communist Eastern European *bazaar* of cross-continental trade in trash and smuggled replicas. All can be found here: hardware, Hutsul craftsmanship mixed with Yeltsin-matrioshkas and *pysanky* (painted eggs) with cosmic and olympic symbols; manuals in kabala and in ballistics.

Zumbrunnen has a feeling that he is descending into a labyrinth of his own memories, de-localized and subversively translated into Ukrainian. What should be a locally unique place turns out to be a mixture of possible and impossible worlds surrounded by a supposedly virgin forest where one can stumble over faint traces of the Soviet army base. Here, where a typical threshold chronotope turns into a chronotope of apocalypse and termination, Zumbrunnen and the world meet their end. Zumbrunnen is met by local Gypsies who, recognizing a foreigner, ask him for money: "perhaps not in English, I exaggerated, but in all other languages, which means in many words from many languages, including the Sanskrit" (78). The Gypsies and their Babel-like multilinguality places them both in the utterly modern globality (they are the quickest to adapt to the new) and in the timeless local, because they are the only authentically indigenous inhabitants of the borderless world. Even their nomadic traditions fit into the logic of the timeless and mythic nature of place. Gypsies are immune to history's cataclysms, because history never really included them. They live outside it, waiting for the local fulfilment of time in accordance with an old oracle, which will launch a new epoch for them and push them out into a new world. Zumbrunnen's death, the tragic consequence of a drunken night at a bar located ominously on the thirteenth kilometer marking the end of the world, frames him within a narrative of a sentimental traveler to the exotic unknown. But this death makes perfect sense for the Gypsies who find Zumbrunnen's dead body in the River:

some day it had to happen. People had talked about it for generations: one day the River will bring a huge Danube fish. Nobody could understand how that would be possible. The River cannot run against its current, nor can the Danube waters. So, the sense of the oracle remained obscure, until very few of them still believed in it. But it did happen—the Danube fish took the shape of a man, a foreigner, who not so long ago was walking along the bank, treading heavily in his expensive, solid shoes. It's a sign that everything has changed and time moves on to a different dimension. (244-245)

The specter has come back to complete the promise of futurity, an instance of hauntology which only the Gypsies read in the proper way as the prophetic opening to the future. The Gypsies leave, unnoticed,

into the future from which they have until now been separated by the River.

Artur Pepa's literary project is emblematic of the necessary and futile desire to grasp the local and place it at some breakthrough moment of the twentieth century. He wants to write a novel about a Hutsul choir, performing for Stalin at his 70th birthday on a fete with all other folk groups from the Soviet Empire: "such a governmental entertainment like folk dances of peoples and nations had to be fancied by those early postmodernists" (95). History tempts him, because it brings in the "possibility of myth and poetry" (102). A historically and mythically charged narrative would have to be, as he realizes, necessarily Marquezian in style, with "extreme density and saturation with details, elliptical allusions" (102). Pepa does not, however, want to follow the Marquezian imperative. He does not know what to do with the Hutsul region—he will not be able to relate to a huge body of knowledge on this people and culture, but leaving out anything will make his representation incomplete. He also realizes he does not know the intricate vernacular words and expressions referring to Hutsuls' everyday life, which makes it impossible for him to know their world. He wants the sum total of local lore, being simultaneously aware that even if he had it, only a fraction of it would find its way into Pepa's book. Pepa is looking for an appropriate genre, or poetics, for writing the local. His vacillation between Marquez and Flaubert indicates the obvious tension between the radical documentary verity of the latter and the former's style based on sensory impressionism, collective and private idiosyncrasies of memory, and the overarching tension of fiction and history. All of these features can be subsumed under the category of magical realism, but, although magical realism of the Marquezian type is Pepa's first intuitive choice, it will not be his chosen form of imparting the essence of the local.

Articulating the local in its intricate vernacularity is necessary to make the novel credible; however, such a representation poses the basic problem of genre. Since there is no vernacular in the post-empire, the return can only happen through a process of archival retrieval and a final reconciliation with myth as the supra-historical narrative logic. But only to the extent that the generic epistemological imperative of the novel as a mode of knowing the world is maintained, does Pepa's prospective book have a chance of finding a proper way of articulating the local in opposition to the violently commodifying globalized poetics of the TV commercial.

Magical realism—the genre of retrieval

If spectrology constitutes the ethics of retrieval of the lost vernacular, magical realism and related fantastic genres are formal devices for narrating the process. The fantastic element premising these novels on a special form of magical realism makes it possible to articulate the complex overlaying of the past within the present. For Fredric Jameson, the films he defines as magic realist are characterized by an "extensive prior knowledge of their historical framework" (180). History in these films and, extending Jameson's argument, in fiction, is

neither a background to nor a trigger for action. It is, rather, the very texture of plot that forms the text's unconscious. The recurrent tropes of the ghost and the corpse figure historical disjunctions constitutive of new representations of the local in both Tokarczuk's and Andrukhovych's texts in a way closely related to Jameson's study of how magic realist style channels history in a mode alternative to postmodernist nostalgia (Jameson 177). These disjunctive figures transgress temporal and spatial borders, defying the objectivity of a division between past and present and the geography of state borders, as well as helping to articulate the liminal space between belonging and uprooting/unhomeliness that the border chronotope expresses. The uncanny undercurrent of the local relocates place to the original indeterminacy of the trans-local, trans-historical, and plural vernacular. In Jameson's conceptualization of magical realism, the genre's particular strength lies in its ability to open up the narrative to a sudden intrusion of history through figures of disjunction and clash—"the shock of entry into the narrative" (180-181). Magical realism is a mode of intensification of experience which escapes narration and creates gaps and ruptures in the narrative flow. Disjunctions erupting violently in magical realist narratives give entry into the repressed past that retains its urgency for the present. Magical realism is for Jameson a mode of verifying the authenticity of history as experience. It is the salient presence and the absent cause that requires articulation: "the articulated superposition of whole layers of the past within the present [...] is the formal precondition for the emergence of this new narrative style" (191).

In post-1989 Eastern European fictions of localism, the deployment of fantastic elements and the magical realist mode launches a process of retrieval in which loss is never compensated for, and belonging is premised on prior uprooting, and of living in another's spectral history and space. The imaginary retrievals of the local and its multiple vernaculars inscribe these narratives within a contradictory and ambivalent logic of postmemory. Traces of the exiled Other induce remembering across historical chasms and dislocations. Postmemory is mediated "not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation" (Hirsch 22). The mediated experience of the past finds its expression in figures of haunting: ghosts, the dead bodies of the returned aliens, and material traces of the exterminated or exiled other, with the simultaneous condition of one's own uprootedness as transmitted experience. In Tokarczuk's and Andrukhovych's texts, as in other fictions of localism of the post-1989 transition period, narratives of belonging and locatedness constantly slip into stories of impossible or precarious identification with place as homeland. These novels shift the mode of articulating the local from categories of familiarity operating through the parameters of the landscape, household, neighborhood and the vernacular, to categories of unfamiliarity operating through the same tropes. Home and exile are represented as literally coeval, interlocked within the space of border discontinuities and rifts. The narrative in these novels is split on practically all levels, reinvesting safe and

known categories with a defamiliarized slippage. Seen in the broader perspective of the transition period of the post-1989 decade, fictions of localism have had a determining role in opening up new approaches to shared history and to the topographies of collective remembering. Revealing the materiality of the haunting past within the present, whether by way of the objects left behind by the departed other, the dead body of the alien returned home, or the most spectral of presences—words in an unknown language that are messages from a departed world—these novels redefine the local as a haunted space of transnational histories that the present must learn to know, express and share.

Conclusion: post-memory narratives of “lesser” Europe. “Unhomeliness,” to use Homi Bhabha’s term (Bhabha, 18), engages the entire novelistic structure of the two texts I have discussed, and is constitutive of the sense of negativity distinguishing the way Eastern Europe tends to be articulated, and perceives itself as a negative doubling of Europe. Fiction of an impossible but necessary locatedness proffers a powerful challenge to the margins of modernity, locating Eastern Europe within the space of postcoloniality. In both novels the local, in its condition of unhomeliness and marginality, is a form of worldliness that both links directly with the flows of globality, and confronts it with forms of sly distortion (Ghosh, 2004, 65).

In these texts of and on post-memory, the uncanny trope is deployed to resist the overdetermination governing the memory of belonging. Marianne Hirsch defines postmemory as chiefly familial, an overdetermination of one generation’s memory by memory of experiences of the previous generation (Hirsch, 22). In Eastern European fictions of the reimagined and partially restored local, familial memory is both powerful in its salience and repressed, imbricated in hosts of ideologies. Postmemory always works through the amnesia on which it is founded. Adding to what Hirsch says about mediation by memories of the previous generation, the cultural transmission of trauma or historical rupture is always also a process of forgetting. The search for a genre of the local is necessarily a process of anamnesis. Magical realism or genres of the fantastic help activate in the narrative flow the process of recollection and open up the local to an intersubjective, transnational and transborder, translational imaginary space revealing its spectral substance.

Fictions of localism, as represented by the two novels I have discussed above, open up vernacular spaces that can be articulated only through the discourse of spectrology. This is a post-national spectrology, where narrative contains traces of national discourse, and nation as being is realized through connection with place (Cooppan 17). Yet these traces are transcribed with those signatures of the eradicated other. Eastern European spectrology addresses the cataclysmic and ruptured history of the region, at the same time speaking across the East-West divide that locates Eastern Europe on the margin of European modernity. These novels are by no means fictions of recuperation, since the ghost and the corpse figure the

irreparability of loss and unhomeliness. But they nonetheless succeed in retrieving the local in its most ambivalent, ghosting and ghostly, appearance. Place, reimagined in the postmemory poetics as the uncanny and spectral vernacular, is where the transnational is realized as the translational (Bhabha 247). Such subaltern, spectral, partly remembered and partly forgotten vernaculars challenge discourses of nation, empire, and, last but not least, Western Europe as the model of worldliness. Mutually conflicting memories, turning into forms of vernacular articulations, have the power to resist modernizing (and obliterating) discourses of the state and commodifying (equally obliterating) discourses of globalization.

Notes

1. Debates on the periodization of the post-communist transition are ongoing, but the first decade after 1989 seems the most logical time-frame to deploy.

2. I refer here to “kresy wschodnie”—the eastern borderland, or the broad stretch of the eastern territories of the Polish-Lithuanian state (1569-1795), which after 1918 became the territories east of the Curzon line within the newly independent Polish state. The eastern borderland has a very rich literary tradition. After 1945 “kresy” were included in the USSR.

3. In March 1968, the state brutally stifled student demonstrations demanding basic freedoms of speech and announced that they had been inspired by Zionists. As a result of anti-Semitic politics, most of the Jewish population living in Poland were forced to emigrate.

4. The discovery of unknown or forgotten facts by searching incomplete archives or even more incomplete memories is a staple narrative element of this fiction.

5. See Constantin V. Boundas: “Fabulation ... is ... a protective illusion that saves us from the void of social dissolution and individual despair”, *Deleuze and Philosophy*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp.205-6.

6. Stanisław Vincenz. *Na wysokiej połoninie* (a 3-part series published between 1938-1979) [*On the High Uplands. Sagas, Songs and Legends of the Carpathians*. Trans. H.C. Stevens, London 1955]; Czesław Miłosz. *Dolina Issy*, Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1955, (*The Issa Valley*. Trans. Louis Iribarne, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1981).

7. Uilleam Blacker, “The Galician Myth in Andrukhovych’s Fiction”, *Slovo*, vol. 19 no.1, Spring 2007, p. 70; Ola Hnatiuk, *Pożegnanie z imperium: ukraińskie dyskusje o tożsamości*, Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2003, pp.183 and 224.

8. See in Robinson, on Timothy Garton Ash as: “a forest of historical complexity ... a territory where peoples, cultures, languages are fantastically intertwined”, qtd. p.2 [*The Uses of Adversity: Essays on the Fate of Central Europe*, Cambridge, Granta, 1991]; on Milan Kundera writing on the “deep distrust of history” in Central/Eastern Europe where its people “represent the wrong side of history: its victims and outsiders” qtd. p.2 [“A Kidnapped West or Culture Bows Out”, *Granta* 11, 1984]; and on Czesław Miłosz, who foregrounds the multicultural legacy of the borderline of Europe in his *Native Realm* (1959), p.3.

9. Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997; Slavoj Žižek, “Eastern Europe’s Republic of Gilead”, *New Left Review*, 1/183, September-October 1990, pp.50-62; Michał Buchowski, “The Specter of Orientalism in Europe: From Exotic Other to Stigmatized Brother”, *Anthropological Quarterly*, Summer 2006, vol. 79 no. 3, pp.463-82.

10. On the chronotope (“the intrinsic connectedness of spatial and temporal relationships that are artistically expressed in literature”) see Mikhail Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics”, in Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: four essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981, p.84.

11. Anibal Quijano and Michael Ennis, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America”, *Nepantla: Views from the South*, vol. 1 issue 3, 2000, pp. 533-580; Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories, Global Designs: coloniality, subaltern knowledges, and border thinking*, Princeton University Press, 2000.

12. Fragments quoted from Andrukhovych translated by the Author.

13. Uilleam Blacker, op. cit., p.63

14. “Czortopole” can be translated as “Devilfield.”

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