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# **Systems of Literary Communication in Great Émigré Literatures**

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## Systems of Literary Communication in Great Émigré Literatures<sup>1</sup>

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### 1.

The notion that literary works in exile constitute a separate class of literary phenomena challenges those beliefs which are almost common in Central and Eastern Europe today, and indirectly also in other cultural-geographic regions. During those decades of communist oppression, we strove to break down barriers first preventing, then merely obstructing, free and comprehensive communication between those abroad and at home. The current gratification resulting from the restoration of these ties is now projected onto the past, disseminating the notion of a fundamental and crucial unity of literary works produced by individual nations, a unity of literature (or, broadly speaking, culture) which had been divided artificially and – more importantly – by external forces.

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1 This text was first presented in Warsaw in 1985 at a meeting of the literary criticism division of Towarzystwo Literackie im. Adama Mickiewicza [Adam Mickiewicz Literary Society]. I am grateful for the inspiring remarks received from Janusz Maciejewski and Jacek Trznadel. This version of the article was finished in autumn 1995 to be presented at a conference organized in December that year by the Slavic Studies Center at the Sorbonne. (The session was canceled due to a wave of strikes which paralyzed France at that time.)

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– Professor at the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, he researches the history of Polish twentieth-century literature in the context of world literature, he is also interested in the theory of essay and literary criticism, as well as the interrelations between contemporary culture and religion. He is the author of numerous scientific articles and books, i.a. *Gry i katastrofy* (1980), *Personalistyczna krytyka literacka* (1981), *Panorama literatury na obczyźnie* (1990), *Trudne spotkanie: literatura polska XX wieku wobec religii* (2005). Winner of the Kościelski Award for 1981.

We seem to be witnessing a triumph of the belief that the internal characteristics and immanent workings of literary development are identical at home and in exile, and that the differences between them result only from external circumstances such as the authors' lives, the behavioral patterns of sociological groups as well as philosophical, religious and – particularly – political views. Theories of literature have slowly given in to the stereotyping that generically unifies Polish literature and culture, not to mention Russian, Czech, and several other. The omnipresence of such a simplified and value-infused image of literature blurs important differences between different types of literary systems; instead of facilitating the creation of a comprehensive narrative of a national literature, whose current history has been shaped by diasporas. In recent years, only a handful of writers and scholars have objected to these homogenizing tendencies: the most astute arguments have been made by Tadeusz Nowakowski during the Congress of Polish Writers at Home and in Exile [Spotkanie Polskich Pisarzy z Kraju i Obczyzny] and later by Jerzy Jarzębski in *Tygodnik Powszechny*.<sup>2</sup> The homogenizing notion, dominant today, seems startling even at the level of its axiological assumption – why would one wish to assimilate and annul differences? Are not diversity and variety more desirable? Do not post-communist societies, “inferior” in so many respects to the so-called “normal” ones in the West, have something unique to offer in the area of culture, in the form of parallel dyadic literatures? Nonetheless, we should avoid the extremes of both the homogenizing and pluralist approaches. Let us first examine the fundamental beliefs that define the arguments, respectively, for the unity and plurality of literatures of countries that share both the totalitarian and émigré experiences.

The key argument of the advocates of unity is that, whether at home or in exile, the authors employ a native language which is the basis for all literary activity. Both here and there, texts were written using a shared language – whether it be Polish, German or Russian – which is an obvious, but also a general and rather banal truth, one of negligible importance to scholarship. Besides, it is easy to prove that a shared language does not exclude the possibility of different literatures. The Spanish language does not annul the distinctiveness of literatures in Argentina, Venezuela and Mexico; French is shared by the literatures of France, Belgium and parts of Canada.

One should not go too far with these analogies, however. The homogenizing approach finds an even stronger justification on ethnic grounds. Despite a shared language, new literatures emerged where there emerged new nations: the literatures listed above are undoubtedly autonomous because they belong to different nations in Latin America, or to Belgium (as opposed

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2 Jerzy Jarzębski, “Pisarze, dzielcie się!,” [“Writers, share!”] *Tygodnik Powszechny* 14 (1991).

to France), or North America (regardless of sharing the English language for a few centuries). It must be noted that 20th-century migrations did not create new nations, as members of great migrant communities died in exile or returned home, or became assimilated – surely their descendants were assimilated. Certain liminal sociological-ethnic phenomena did emerge, but on a far smaller scale than nation-building *per se*.

Following the dictates of common sense in research which suggest avoiding extreme positions, it must be admitted that there are no dual Polish, Russian, Czech literatures etc. in the literal sense of these formulas. But neither can we agree to the cognitive approach, just as unproductive, because little value is added resulting from the acknowledging the linguistic and national identity of individual literatures. Apart from the noble and once useful platitude about the unity of literatures, one must recognize and analyze their numerous and rich differences and varieties. Obviously, I do not have in mind the obvious differences resulting from natural or ontological distinctiveness of the artists and individual configurations of time and space. I mean the structural differences of perhaps universal scope in the modern era which dates back roughly to the Industrial and the French Revolutions.

Emigration creates original systems of literary communication, distinct from the ones back home. They resemble one another more than they resemble their respective linguistic-national equivalents. Consequently, literary communication in exile is closer to the analogous German or Russian forms of literary communication than to the one in the Polish People's Republic, not to mention those which were in separate areas under German and Soviet occupations after 1939. I define literary communication as the entirety of the phenomena, relations and institutions determining the existence and the functioning of literary meanings and values. The existence of literary values and meanings includes their creation, dissemination and, in particular, their reception. Institutions, in turn, create the possibility of contact between people with any kind of interest in literature.

The difference in the nature and function of each émigré literature derives from its separation from the native ethnic territory and its national structures. That which is signaled by the expression “in exile” is precisely what determines the emergence of a new type of literary communication and gives distinctness to the emigrant literatures in comparison to the “normal” ones, functioning within national communities, on the native territory and within the framework of their own national socio-cultural arrangements.

Before I present a more detailed theoretical description of the system of literary communication in exile, I am going to discuss other methodological proposals for the examining of the specific characteristic of émigré

literature. The most frequent approach has tended to focus on facts not typically literary in nature, pointing to differences in the life experiences of the authors (experiences related to their stay abroad), or to their ideological and worldviews presented in the context of civic and artistic freedom. There have also been numerous attempts to indicate strictly literary facts in search of common determinants that comprise the émigré character of a given literature.

This research direction (signaled by Claudio Guillén<sup>3</sup> and others) was adapted by Wojciech Wyskiel in his resourceful study *Wprowadzenie do tematu: literatura i emigracja* [*Literature and Emigration: An Introduction*]. Assuming the approach which views literature in exile as a “system of texts,” he attempts to define specific migrant “literary structures.” In the key passage of his theoretical-literary analysis, Wyskiel writes:

Among the great literary subjects [...] one seems to have a special relation to the literature in exile. I call it the theme of dispossession. I understand dispossession mainly as depriving the individual from all to which the individual is entitled by the right of being born in a particular place, to particular parents and in a particular time. It is manifested in individual works with varying degrees of clarity, in several transformations and embodiments. Nevertheless, I think that it can be defined and described. [...] The theme of dispossession evokes an entire range of motifs or topoi. This is not the place to try and catalogue them. However, two motifs seem exceptionally important here: that of the Arcadian homeland and of death in exile.<sup>4</sup>

Although the great subject of dispossession, alongside its numerous semantic patterns, is frequently discussed by exile writers, it cannot become a determinant of the specificity of émigré literature. An awareness of specific historical-literary arrangements debunks the abstract character of this idea and its incompatibility with textual empiricism. The lost Arcadian lands were described equally frequently at home and abroad. Another motif mentioned by Wyskiel's study, that “of a great journey (modeled after Odysseus)” was frequently chosen also by authors who were not forced into exile. In world literature, the theme of alienation from social reality was most perfectly captured by Franz Kafka, and that of alienation from contemporariness and

3 Claudio Guillén, “On the Literature of Exile and Counter-Exile,” *Books Abroad* 50 (2) (1976).

4 Wojciech Wyskiel, “Wprowadzenie do tematu: literatura i emigracja,” *Pisarz na obczyźnie*, ed. Teodor Bujnicki and Wojciech Wyskiel (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1985), 34-35.

search for time past by Marcel Proust, even though neither was an emigrant in the common sense of the word.

Similar problems plague other attempts at locating the specificity of émigré literatures at the level of literary form. One Polish literary scholar tried to extricate the specific poetics of the literature in question: the fundamental characteristics were centered on notions such as space, time, the concept of author ("creator," "poet," "writer," "artist"), a construct labeled "literature on legs" and memory. Such poetics, arguably descriptive from the outset, frequently shifts dangerously close to normative poetics, and rather than defining texts created exclusively abroad, tends to define the qualities which such texts should display. In the concluding remarks, the author basically admits this, stating the following:

Just as the poetics of émigré literature was practiced both at home and abroad, so did literature which was not so-called émigré appear wherever it wished to: at home, in exile or in any other place abroad.<sup>5</sup>

Postulates on the theoretically significant and wide reaching historical-literary distinctiveness of diaspora literatures cannot be defended on the level of artistic language. Advocates of the approach which unifies individual national literatures are right to tease and ironically enquire about the exclusively emigrant artistic convention supposedly emerging in exile. Indeed, emigrant poets did not create a qualitatively different type of metaphor or verse pattern, prose writers did not come up with a new position of the narrator, nor did playwrights produce a new type of dialogue. Thus, academic liquidators are right about the morphology of literary works, but they are wrong about the identity of systems of literary communication.

## 2.

A basic consequence of the existence of literature in exile is its inevitable coexistence with the literatures of the host states. Institutions and literary circulations of emigrants function within the institutions and literary circulations of their adopted country; the life of literary diasporas either courses next to, above or among them, but it always confronts the literary life of the host societies. Thus, the key specificity of the system of artistic communication in exile (including literary communication, of course) is the overlap between the web of relations

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5 Eugeniusz Czaplejewicz, "Poetyka literatury emigracyjnej," ["Poetics of Literature in Exile"] *Poezja* 4-5 (1987): 170.

connecting people and institutions interested in literature/art and the host web of relations. This impacts the means of production, dissemination, and above all the reception of literary values.

Within the systems of artistic communication abroad there emerge in large numbers mechanisms of comparative, confrontational and (partially) artistic perception. While living in an alien linguistic and cultural environment, participating in the economy, submitting to foreign legal regulations and to the consequences of political activity, and so on; the audience in exile has a distinct relation to émigré artistic creations, especially in the case of literature. Could this proposition be tested against the example of emigrant communities which are almost completely cut off from having cultural contacts with the host society? Such cases could be found in the political Polish diaspora in London or the economic diasporas in Chicago and New York. But these instances are rare and rather exceptional, found among the individuals who almost never participate in literary life itself. As a rule, one is influenced by the system of signs of the new living environment.

This regularity becomes more strongly pronounced with the passing of time, and especially in the young generation. For the youth raised abroad, the local culture – which includes also language and literature – becomes the basic frame of reference. This young readership looks at emigrant writing and the whole of that nation's literature from the position of an outsider. Their perception is not only irreversibly relativized through their relation to external systems, but the emphasis is also moved to the patterns and values of the host environment as its contemporary culture becomes one's point of departure. This phenomenon concerns not only the readership, but determines the behavior of the artists as well.

Such reversal of perspective may be perfectly illustrated by the activities of young writers in the 1950s who grouped themselves around the London-based magazines *Merkuriusz* and *Kontynenty*. The influence of their environment, or to be more precise, the background of English (or Anglo-Saxon) culture showed in the poetics of their lyrical work and their programmatic activities. They recognized their new position in literary culture and the process of artistic communication, as declared by Janusz A. Ichnatowicz in *Merkuriusz Polski*:

Those of our generation, who left Poland in 1939, or crossed Russia have also, from our early childhood, crossed a kaleidoscope of cultures and education systems which – despite opposition from our parents and Polish teachers (we all know how that was happening) – inevitably left their trace on the surface of that psychological mirror [...] we look at the Polish culture through the eyes of Western culture as opposed to the older

generation who viewed the Western culture through the lens of the Polish culture. We read Słowacki against the background of the Seine poplars and Stratford walls.<sup>6</sup>

Generally speaking, the situation is less clear for those very people sending such literary signals. Moreover, artists in exile behave like those artists back home, which is to say: individuals find it easier to alienate themselves from the contemporary context, although one can never alienate himself completely. Meanwhile, among the receivers of literary signals, such instances can be ignored by theoretical and historical-literary reflection: reception of artistic phenomena in exile is always different, sometimes radically different. This, in turn, completely modifies the course of literary communication. Literary studies of the last two decades have already indicated the great role of reception in the historical-literary process, and even in the understanding and constituting of the literary work. In his watershed study on the subject, Janusz Sławiński writes:

the morphology of the work includes not only what constitutes the structural order but also that which makes it resemble more a field than a system. Viewed as a structure, the work reveals itself to us in the aspect of its objectivity and stability, viewed as a field it reveals itself in its openness, in its – dyadic – subjectivity and, consequently, its susceptibility to the intervention by those who at any point and by any means may play the communicative role of receiver designed within the work. The structure makes the work an object which can last in the historical process; as a field the work is capable of living in that process, and as a consequence, of becoming transformed.<sup>7</sup>

Another difference between emigrant and national reception – the latter conditioned by restricted liberty – can be described according to the principle of asymmetry. In non-democratic and non-sovereign societies, reception is selective, controlled from the top and steered from the outside. The very possibility of reading various external and historical sources is annulled. This annulment concerns, first and foremost, literature in exile and vast swaths of world literature, and even some works from the state's own

6 Janusz A. Ilnatowicz, "Z listów do przyjaciela (O młodym pokoleniu i jego odrębności od starszych)," ["From Letters to a Friend: On the Young Generation and its Distinctness from the Older Ones"] *Mercuriusz Polski* 2 (1995).

7 Janusz Sławiński, "Odbiór i odbiorca w procesie historycznoliterackim," *Próby teoretycznoliterackie* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo PEN, 1992), 82.



national tradition. Meanwhile, diasporas allow access to sources, without the limitations imposed by censorship, the police and customs.

An even greater asymmetry can be found in the sphere of reception testimonies. Even if, by chance, an opportunity arose in the enslaved states to read forbidden books, it was impossible to produce reading testimonials – or it was possible to do so only unofficially, in private and for one's own use. The periods of National Socialism and Stalinism lack texts which systematize the process of reading. To put it another way, no critical-literary and scholarly texts were published on Orwell or Koestler, on several works of other foreign writers, nor on the contemporary literary refugees, on Heine the Jew in Germany, Vladimir Solovyov – the fideist – in Russia, reactionary Witkacy in Poland (whatever was published on them, was also grotesquely biased). Paraphrases, pastiches and stylizations had to be unclear and undecipherable, while sociological research on vast areas of literature was forbidden, or rather – could not be carried out as unofficial reception was officially non-existent.

Another important difference between the two types of analyzed literatures is related to access and the possibility of continuing a tradition. This problem resembles the previously discussed issue, but it is more pronounced among the artists of the enslaved states. Exile allowed the artists to freely connect with all temporal layers and currents of national and common tradition. In contrast, totalitarian states exercised strict control over what could and what could not be creatively assimilated from the heritage of the past. The selection was motivated by the ideological usefulness of the past works and, in extreme cases, entire periods were to vanish from collective memory. Literatures emerging in totalitarian or authoritarian states had to develop without the support of tradition as a whole as writers repeatedly tried to tie the loose ends, connect the elements of cultural sequence, and save literature from annihilation, reviving it as a living phenomenon which had been administratively eliminated.

Some specific features of literary communication (which could be seen as “abnormal” from the perspective of non-divided literatures) are shared, or at least similar, in the national and emigrant systems. This includes a frequent, in fact regular, temporal gap between the work's creation and publication. In non-democratic states, this regularity was caused by all kinds of censorship and repressive measures, and among the emigrants by financial and “technical” difficulties broadly understood. The principle of hiatus between the temporal systems of production and reception includes phenomena as diverse as the so-called late debuts (even by the most recognized writers: Białoszewski and Herbert in Polish literature, Solzhenitsyn in the Russian), or a decades-long absence of works pretending to the status of a masterpiece: *The Master and Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Kolyma Tales* by Varlam Shalamov, *The*

*Pulp* by Jerzy Andrzejewski, early exile works by Gombrowicz, Bobkowsk's *Sketches with the Quill* and so on.

In the historical-literary process, the chronological distance is frequently widened by the geographical one, since relatively many works written in home countries began to first function, and for years, in exile (e.g. Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, Tyrmand's *Diary 1954*, *The Gulag Archipelago* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn). This became commonplace after the establishment of the Russian *samizdat* and the Polish writers' habit of publishing in exile in the second half of the 1970s. This phenomenon becomes increasingly important in attempts to fully recreate the historical-literary process, because an entire group of excellent works existed in two temporal systems distant from each other: in the dimensions of the creative process and the mechanisms of reception. Returning to Janusz Sławiński's categories, one could posit that different orders regulate the creation of literary structures and their existence as areas of readerly activity. As closed structures of signs, they refer to the original context, as a "repository where interpretations accumulate and become systematized:" they direct us to the temporal dimension from a few or dozens years ago. This separation of chronological layers becomes an important interpretative problem also in creating historical-literary syntheses.

Several literary masterpieces exist, thus, in two different temporal dimensions and two different systems of literary communication – at home and in exile. This complicates the traditional recognition of the need to write two histories of literatures (existing here and there), the need to write two additional histories (of creation and reception) – or at least to acknowledge the temporal incongruence of both spheres of literary communication. It was this specificity of divided Central and Eastern European literatures which proved the historical-literary and interpretative validity of creating two separate and complementary theories, particularly pronounced in German scholarship, namely *Produktionsaesthetik* and *Rezeptionsaesthetik*.

Let us return to the communicative differences between national and emigrant systems. The basic difference lies in the greater autonomy enjoyed by exiled literature and its freedom to realize its immanent possibilities and goals. Literature in the non-democratic states is submitted to control and external pressure, forced to fulfill external goals. Depending on the methodological approach, this will be expressed in different ways, but the gist of it remains the same: there is a qualitative difference between them in the possibilities of realizing one's own being, entelechy, teleology, grammar, destination and so on.

Diaspora literature is also prone to social pressure, including audience expectations, economic limitations, pressure from political and religious institutions and demands of the sponsors. However, external pressures in

emigration are incomparably less severe than in the enslaved societies for two reasons: first, the participants in literary life largely identify with the values and goals of emigration, and consequently external expectations and demands are not divergent from those of the writers. This theoretical assumption is confirmed by the histories of 20th-century diasporas. German literature in exile opposed Hitler even stronger than the community of refugees fleeing the Third Reich, and the Russian exile writers opposed Bolshevism at least as fervently as other Russian emigrants; exile literatures of Central European nations were at least as independently driven and democratic as other institutions. Second, it is easier to avoid external pressure in exile, as the loosely organized and “stateless” emigrant community is less prone to control and repression. Such communities work rather through cultural pressures “spiritual” in nature as there is no possibility of traditionally defined censorship, nor of considerable gratification. Additionally, it is much easier to free oneself from the local inconveniences by participating in the literary life of geographically distant lands – emigrant communication crosses state boundaries.

Other important differences between systems of literary communication will be only mentioned briefly in the following paragraphs. Exile literature is characterized by a statistical shift – the relative number of writers increase faster abroad. In large contemporary diasporas, this concentration increased sometimes several dozens of times. After the events of 1933, nearly one percent of the German population left the country, with German writers figuring prominently among them; after the Second World War the total number of Polish emigrants amounted to 2-3% of the national community, including almost half of our most outstanding writers and about 1/3 of all literary people. This leads statistically to an increased literary interaction and greater contact opportunities within the community. What is important and greatly influences the goals of literature abroad as well as the functioning and the shape of literary works is that their key audience is located outside the emigration system, in the home country. This audience, however, remains nearly – sometimes completely – beyond one’s reach and with the passing of time becomes less familiar. All of this results in diaspora authors turning more towards the future reader and the time when the home country will no longer be isolated.

Here are the other characteristics specific to literary communication in exile:

- small circulations of books and journals resulting from smaller audiences, as already mentioned, and from the financial weakness of emigrants;
- lesser intensity of literary life, fewer journals and publishing houses (which translates to fewer reviews, public readings etc.);

- weaker dialogue with the neighboring disciplines of emigrant culture, fewer theater spectacles, film adaptations, television and radio programs (with the notable exception of the anti-communist writers taking part in the Western radio programming after the Second World War);
- more intense contact with foreign cultural arenas: bilingual writing, translations (for instance, American film scripts by German emigrants), etc.;
- a particularly difficult situation for authors using other media than the book and the press, resulting from the weakness or non-existence of emigrant theater, cinematography, radio and television. In other words, playwrights, authors of film scripts, radio programs, songs and librettos are faced with particularly difficult conditions.

### 3.

The distinctiveness of the systems of literary communication in exile is largely responsible for the difference in the development of the historical-literary processes home and abroad. They follow different timelines and their turning points do not take place at the same time. In the historical outline of recent Polish writing, 1945 is the only date of equal importance to both systems. Later, the critical moments in the nation's history (at the end of 1940s, middle 1950s, 1980 or 1989), do not overlap with turning points in emigration literature. Obviously, the introduction of social realism, the abandoning of its ideas and the reclaiming of pluralism in literary life were insignificant phenomena outside the borders of the Polish People's Republic. In exile, it was the purely literary or sociological-literary factors (such as generational change) that mattered most. In my attempted periodization of emigrant literature, major turning points are signaled by the following dates: 1945, 1950-51, 1968-69, 1980-81.<sup>8</sup>

Russian literature is similarly asynchronous. The history of that portion of literature which developed in the Soviet state can be divided into the following periods: the first one starts with the Russian Revolution and ends with the complete domination of Social Realism (usually pegged to 1932), the second one ends with the political thaw and de-Stalinization in the mid 1950s, the third concludes with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, the timeline of Russian literature in exile is based on the appearance of three emigration

8 Krzysztof Dybcia, "Czym jest i jaką ma wartość literatura emigracyjna?" ["What is the Nature and Value of Literature in Exile"] *Kultura Niezależna* 11-12 (1985). Reprinted in *Panorama literatury na obczyźnie. Zarys popularny*, ["Landscape of Literature in Exile. A Popular Outline"] (Kraków: Oficyna Literacka, 1990).

waves: after the Russian Civil War (1917-1920), after the Second World War and at the beginning of 1970s.<sup>9</sup>

This article focused on the structural and functional similarities between various literatures in exile. Such is the approach resulting from a theoretical-literary perspective. A historical-literary approach would reveal several discrepancies. Literatures of the three great emigrations of this century (Russian, German-speaking and Polish) differed in how long they lasted as well as their range, geography, genealogical hierarchies and worldviews.<sup>10</sup> For instance, an important feature of the anti-Nazi emigration (which slightly modifies our theoretical findings) consisted in the emergence of a German language-based system of communication created by representatives of several nations and people of varied ethnic belonging. In the diaspora, the German language was used by the Austrians (Broch, Musil), Germans (the Mann brothers, Brecht) and authors identifying as Israeli as well as those expressing solidarity with more than one ethnic group – for instance, the citizens of Czechoslovakia and Hungary (and earlier, the citizens of the Habsburg monarchy) who were of Jewish origin and raised in the German language and culture (Koestler, Lukács, Joseph Roth), writers such as Canetti and Celan. This richness of literary facts may allow us to reconstruct a few varieties of communication systems in exile but it will not undermine the validity of distinguishing a separate type.

*Translation: Anna Warso*

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9 Wolfgang Kasack, "Emigracja," *Encyklopedyczny słownik literatury z 1917 roku*, (London: 1988), 878-882.

10 I discuss the similarities and differences between the Polish and German emigration in an analysis published in *Przełqd Polonijny 2* (1996).