

*On Emigration, or the Stories  
about the Painful Loss of Language*

*A Double Voice on the Poetry and Emigration*

*London spring is especially foggy and humid this year. Waiting for the first rays, I look at the luxuriant and lush greenery of the garden and pages written up with a dense print. They arrived from far Australia, promising a bit of warmth. Strings of sentences look similar, nowadays the font character says little about the man; one would like to go beyond the printer template and read, as in the past, trembling hand, personality and the writer's message. As the experts say: the way we write reflects our inner life. Hidden in a symbolic font today's world of authors is deciphered with the help of imagination. I begin an attempt to decode meanings, symbols, and archetypes. Together with Urszula Chowaniec, I am a literary critic; we both are looking for words, definitions to describe this or the other poem. We talk, negotiate, search for an answer to the question of our modern emigration...*

*Anna Maria Mickiewicz*

**ANNA MARIA MICKIEWICZ:** Tangled wandering routes and choices preserved so far away in the form of memories, stories, chronicles, documentaries, and poetry – they seem to be familiar, close, somewhere already told, lived through, written, don't they? Many years ago, the President of the Union of Polish Writers Abroad, professor Jozef Garlinski, asked me to write an essay on what, for my generation, emigration is. Here is a fragment: *What emigration taught me? (...) possibilities to wander around the boundaries called Kresy. Here, in London, there are still persons who were forced to leave the country during the war. I compose images from what they tell me. (...) I feel richer than my peers in the country; I hungrily swallow stories, both from the war, and those about customs, beliefs, traditions. I feed the invisible roots that still need new juices to fill the space known as identity. Emigration means building, or rather rebuilding of landscapes; collecting stories and memories in a specific way (...)*<sup>1</sup>

**URSZULA CHOWANIEC:** It is a nice fragment. Identity as the collecting of stories. It probably agrees with my definition of an emigrant. The man experiences life outside his language, but only through a language he can name and share with it. So perhaps it is the language that allows us, as cognitive researchers want, to experience. What, in fact, we experience when our domesticated, learned from childhood, safe and familiar language is confronted with the fundamental alienation of a new (strange) space and a new (foreign) language, which is a situation of (e)migration? We experience unlimited alienation. Our words no longer create reality, do not match ideally with objects but break against the incomprehension; for the environment they are empty sounds. However, this strangeness is not the strangeness of a new world. We experience self-alienation. We become strange to ourselves. Others, household members of a new space, label us, as in one work awarded in the "My Emigration" competition: *First, we were called 'Aliens', then 'Foreigners' and 'Migrants', afterwards 'Newcomers', 'New Australians', and finally 'Ethnics'. I do not know what but I know who we are now.* ("New World" by Marian Brzezinski). And this experience is both very individual and painfully repeated.

**AMM:** Probably the convergence of the emigrant fate causes its mantra-like character, generational repetitiveness. Characteristic is remembering the otherness of the world around, focusing on continuous comparison what is here and there, experiencing separations, loneliness, and nostalgia. I am reading the works submitted for the competition and I have an impression that I feel the beating of writers' hearts returning to their homelands, welcomes and farewells with close

people, the vastness and overwhelming noise of airports.

UCH: Indeed, the “otherness” you mention is an interesting category. By this otherness, very often cherished, immigrants remain outsiders and newcomers. They are left alone forever, they have to struggle with a new language first, learn it, stubbornly believing that new words mean, taste, smell, and look the same. Then they have to jolly this otherness, alienation, these eyes staring at them because a mispronounced word betrays them at every step, and perhaps their clothing, the way they walk... I do not know how you see this but emigration for me is, above all, a separation from language. Emigration, migration, leaving one’s homeland *where the osmosis between language and space exist*, as it once was written by Izabela Filipiak, a Polish writer also with an emigrant experience (“Blue Menagerie”, 1997) – is abandoning the “invisibility” of language. It is a difficult experience, sometimes pushing one into the claws of melancholy. Because a loss of language is substantial and until we learn a new one, we are doomed to a helpless silence or mumbling. The texts submitted to the literary competition announced by Favoryta tell exactly about this loss.

AMM: Undoubtedly, emigration is a hard experience, I agree completely! The stories include several interesting thoughts, reflections destructive to an idyllic vision of the emigrant life. Such complexity of existence was a subject for Witold Gombrowicz, although his approach was related critically and primarily to communal, and national stereotypes. Australian writers challenge the life of the emigrant in its individual dimension. As an example can serve such an observation found in one of the stories: *emigration is mistakenly considered by some people as a pathological condition when we lose something that we own; on the contrary emigration is hard work on oneself, building.*

UCH: That is right – an Australian competition and texts about emigration! It is interesting: dozens of texts deal with emigration in the most diverse forms: different are genres and styles, perspectives and topics, a different tone here, and still all these texts have one common core. This essence is probably in the universality of the (e)migrant experience, what you described as “the convergence of the emigrant fate “. By the way, I will add that I put the initial “e” in the brackets because now it is so fashionable to reject emigration and praise migration, as the mobility freedom is greater, no conviction to a foreign country due to political reasons (as Jerzy Jarzelski wrote, for instance, in “The Farewell with Emigration” at the beginning of the 90s in the last century). I suspect that emigration is a far deeper and wider experience than political or historical definitions, but also the titles of works submitted for the competition support my thesis that the initial “e” has now a bad name, hence *My Migrations*<sup>2</sup> rather than emigrations!

AMM: I really like the variety of subjects in the entries which, however, forces us to take up the difficult work of categorising. It seems that on the foreground what should be introduced is a division of works by the age of authors and the time of leaving the country. The anthology may be for the first time such a significant representation featuring writers of the middle generation who left Poland during the martial law is featured. Previous literary and diary studies shared with experience and events of the World War II generation. In many testimonies a dramatic turning point of 1981 is clear; it ruins the order, forces immediate decisions, changes the course of life paths; it brings a compulsory shift of the signs. This is a very important creative life metamorphosis. The change in literary expression is recognisable, from the fluent, one can say, nineteenth-century Polish language we enter into an area of fast, interrupted speech, full of short sentences, equivalents, and understatements. The contemporary and emigration literary image of nostalgia, so typical in the work of emigration, today is not presenting colourful descriptions of nature, is not interfering with erudite discourses. It is a fragmentation and loosing of the threads, rapid expressions of the deepest longings, fears, and emotions, showing suddenly interrupted lives. The style of works is characterised by a random reporting, stripped of emotions, accumulations of facts and events that determine the route to the life space. The stories are sometimes humoristic, poetical, constantly recalling the same question – to come back to the country or not – like in a poem by Ewa Nadolska: “A Conversation”.

– *The communism has already gone long ago.  
Listen, Misiek, we are coming back.  
– Right, one should move,  
So why do we linger on?*

– *Here they don't understand us,  
Cause our mentality is different.  
– They don't laugh here at odd jokes.  
So why do we play for time? (...)*

UCH: And one more! Tracing all texts submitted for the competition, which result is this book, one has a distinct impression of authenticity of written experiences (although sometimes they are camouflaged, for example by the third-person narration). As if the loss of language was so powerful an experience, perhaps traumatic, that telling a story transforms into *life writing*. Even if we deal with irony, or a joke, as the fragment quoted by you, some genuine uncertainty and fear are hidden behind it.

AMM: Yes, authenticity, and that perfectly matches a form of morality play, philosophical considerations that conversations with random people can take. Because apart from the authenticity of this piece of writing, there is yet another feature: it is a reflection on what is the randomness of the world, which is probably the most appropriate term to reflect the nature of this literature – the case literature. For example in a story by Henryk Jurewicz, “Franek”, such a character’s reflection appears:

*(...) In fact how much depends on chance and how much on reason?(...) To what extent can we consciously influence destiny? What distinguished those who survived the Stalinist and Nazis pogroms from the victims? Intelligence or flair, the strength of character or humility, knowledge, intuition?... What explains the gift of survival, the skills to adapt to harsh conditions? What gives a man an advantage over others in critical moments? I would like to know it in the moment when by emigrating to the other part of the world I change my and my family's curriculum (...).*

Randomness takes on an exceptional meaning in the immigration circumstances, governing the choice and fate of characters-immigrants.

UCH: All these texts, indeed, sketch some type of the immigrant, foreigner, alien; the one that represents who the authors once were (when they landed on the “new banks”) or the one they still carry inside (the most often nostalgic, unreconciled to the loss, as in Maryla Rose’s poem: “Return”, where the female character stubbornly comes back “to herself”: “*still There from where I am / I Am*”). Polish culture has a huge tradition reflecting on what is emigration. From the romantic period, at least, the attempts to describe the position of the emigrant are noticed. The fact that the national epic “Pan Tadeusz” is written from the nostalgic perspective of the emigrant, shows that the emigrant condition is strongly rooted in the tradition of our country. The novelty of these Australian texts on emigration is almost a complete lack of sentimental patriotism, a lack of banal repetitions of slogans about yearning. Perhaps this is a characteristic feature of literature from sunny Australia.

AMM: Well, surely it is worth asking the question: what is exceptional in the Australian literary texts? One can risk a statement that they are created by the descriptions of a great, strange, and only partly subjugated, world. The stories are full of fear for the colourful reality, rampant nature and customs. A motif of distance and a feeling of being cut off from the rest of the world returns. It is portrayed by one of Australia’s definitions in one of the stories: *For some it is the end of the world, for others – it is the beginning.*

UCH: Emigration is sometimes a beginning of an extraordinary adventure (in a foreign country), and sometimes a sad end of a secure life in a native land. All texts about (e)migrations want to familiarise bravely these difficult experiences, learn them and share with them as with an enriching, although almost always painful adventure. Because it is the adventure which implies a loss, and that always hurts...

AMM: You should have these two dimensions of emigration in mind: sometimes it enriches, sometimes it devastates! I will finish optimistically, though: my “Australian” reading caused me to moved in time to the literary antipodes, I came back with a suitcase of richer emotions. They will stay in my memory. I am sure that they will also remain in the memory of the Authors’ families and become, after some time, a documented legend. I appreciate the effort put in by Creators and Publishers. I wish, we wish that the book will find its place in the consciousness of the Polish community in exile, and beyond.

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a poet.*

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Maria Mickiewicz, “Emigracja?” [Emigration?], *Pamiętnik Literacki*, vol. XXVIII, London 2003, p. 91 [translated from Polish].

<sup>2</sup> Marika Biber and Paweł Waryszak entitled their works “My Migration”.