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Geoculture(?)

c r i t i c s :

Elżbieta Rybicka, *Geopoetyka. Przestrzeń i miejsce we współczesnych teoriach i praktykach literackich* (Geopoetics. Space and Place in Contemporary Literary Theory and Practice), Kraków 2014.

Thanks to the work of Elżbieta Rybicka, use of the term “geopoetics” has been active in Polish literary scholarship for at least several years, chiefly because of the article “Geopoetics (On the City, Space and Place in Contemporary Literary Theory and Practice)” included in the book *Kulturowa teoria literatury* (Cultural Literary Theory).¹ The three areas delineated in the article title back then have now been reduced in the book *Geopoetyka. Przestrzeń i miejsce we współczesnych teoriach i praktykach literackich* to the last two. The central concept, however, has expanded rather than shrunk. In the 2005 article, Rybicka stipulated that geopoetics could be applied to both artistic practices and theoretical reflection about them, but kept the focus of the concept limited to topographies, understood as places inscribed in cultural texts.² In the 2014 book, geopoetics has become a concept-in-use, actively and decisively influencing and reshaping local contexts.³ That means that geopoetics, as a traveling concept, has in a few years managed to precisely define the field of its explorations, while at the same time its base has grown considerably.

Rybicka divides her book into six parts, among which we find chapters devoted to the transition from the poetics of space to the politics of place, where the central

topic becomes the categoria of the spatial and topographic turns in literary studies; geopoetics as a scholarly orientation, treated as a collective and organizing term encompassing a whole group of ideas connecting concepts from geography, literature, and culture more broadly; an attempt to create a new lexicon of concepts to accommodate the interdisciplinary interest in space; an anthropology of place that takes into account the experience of space in the perceptual, emotional, and autobiographical registers; how place, memory, and literature are connected; and finally, the new (postmodern) regionalism and local narratives.

Geopoetics is, for Rybicka, primarily a scholarly orientation, aiming toward the complex and multifaceted project of analyzing and interpreting all kinds of interactions taking place between literary creation (and related cultural practices) and geographic space. This extremely wide formulation carries with it the real risk of becoming a totalizing, universal approach. Rybicka, aware of the fact, steers clear of such ambitions, but her scholarly practice and the scope and variety of the questions she deals with reveal geopoetics in terms of general theory. Geopoetics can be perceived here to be claiming its right to analyze all kinds of questions relating to spatiality, understood as an irreducible ingredient in every artistic experience and practice; questions previously explained away by the oversimplification that everything has to take place in some kind of space. The conceptual scope and the contexts dealt with go far beyond any short explanation of the term and occupy a space in between, covering all intersections of “geo” and

¹ E. Rybicka, “Geopoetyka (o mieście, przestrzeni i miejscu we współczesnych teoriach i praktykach kulturowych,” in *Kulturowa teoria literatury* (Cultural Literary Theory), ed. M.P. Markowski, R. Nycz, Kraków 2006.

² Rybicka, “Geopoetyka,” pp. 479, 480.

³ I use a term developed by Mieke Bal in *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*, co-written with Sherry MacDonald, Toronto 2002, p. 52.

poesis, geography and poetics, concrete topographical designations and the creative act, as well as, finally, a separate scholarly discipline with its own history and methodology and the aggregate of analytical tools used in studying the literary work, viewed as the conceptual poetry of geography itself and the inherently geographic thrust of the poetic impulse. This basic rule of geopoetics allows, Rybicka claims, for balance and tension between and among the subject representing its biography, reality geographically presented, and language, specifically in its incarnation as literature.

The main topics of geopoetics remain space and place. Rybicka traces the long process of how the semantic range of these terms was formed up to their current configuration. What the book offers readers is more a record of changes in meaning and a juxtaposition of several competing projects than an authorial conclusion. There is a traditional procedure in the humanistic treatment of geography that divides and opposes space and place, attributing abstraction and generality to the former and keeping concrete topographic localization as the domain of the latter. After the spatial turn, the initially universal and impersonal space, formerly seen as a neutral container of events, acquires an active role as a tool, a means, a goal and a method, but is nonetheless treated as socially constructed. In another part of the book Rybicka observes that place (but not space) was treated by the dominant theories of the cultural turn as a construct of social practices. Objectified thus, place becomes indistinguishable from space and on that basis it is difficult to draw a boundary between these two spatial categories. The line of change remains clearly marked, however: the fixity and neutrality of spatial localizations yields to a productive formulation, but contemporary conceptions are in turn altering the picture still more drastically – moving from radical social constructionism to a vision closer to non-anthropocentric currents in the human sciences, accenting the dynamic agency of non-human actors and underscoring the active role played by places. It will therefore be no exaggeration to state that the relationships between subject and space are beginning to be characterized by a certain mutability, the subject is becoming spatialized, and space – subjectivized, though it is notable that Rybicka

does not go so far as to make such a bold proposition. The place (now probably interchangeably with space) will 1) function as a form of localization, placing within a locality and referring to the material shape or meaning of a place, as well as 2) encompassing the affective sphere and defining a person's relationship to a given *loci*. The category of place is increasingly understood geographically, directing our attention to the concrete, material, and situated, at the cost of a universal order of spatial theory. To grasp the problem a different way: perhaps the most successful attempt to describe place in literary scholarship is the metaphor of the constellation, making possible various kinds of connections with personal experience, the annals of culture, and the imagination, in which connections locality becomes the central category, though Rybicka approaches it with some mistrust and always interprets it in relation to globality.

I would like to examine these so far casually outlined problems in a different context. It will not address – something otherwise worth noting – the thought expressed in the double motto that adorns the book. In this formulation, geopoetics can turn in two possible directions: one is embodied by the work of W.G. Sebald, dealing with the experience of concrete topographical and geographical space, immersed in direct contact with it and shaped by certain narrative practices relating to that place. The other is the textualization of space found in the work of Michał Paweł Markowski, and the examination of space using the conceptual tools of literary studies and the agency of literature. Only a concept of the heterogeneity of place that recognizes it as both participant in and area of relations between literature and geographic space and the potential of geopoetics as a strategy for interpretation of artistic work with particular attention to the artistic process enables it to be presented via the following four aspects: 1) poetological, covering the traditional topics of poetics, including language, character, genre theory, and reader reception, 2) geographical – dealing with geographical issues most frequently involving maps, places, imagined geographies (seen from a literary perspective) 3) anthropological – due to the crucial role played by the experience of places and space (the perceptual and affective aspects of literature) and last but not least, 4) performative

– observing literary creation as a causative activity with the potential to initiate further activities, world-creating, event-creating and meaning-creating action. This four-fold division proposed by the author will serve as my template for reflections whose aim is to reveal all of the contexts discussed by Rybicka.

Geopoetics as poetics will perhaps be the most important aspect of this system from the point of view of literary scholarship, ennobling the arsenal of poetological instruments and generally offering a strategy that parallels their revelatory work with literary texts. In this formulation of her strategy, Rybicka shows and highlights the geographical aspect and takes into account topographical factors. From precisely that angle she seeks to examine language: as rhetorical pathways in literary topographies, as geographical proper names or, finally, as locally marked vocabulary. Of particular interest is her treatment of the study of genres, since literary genres in connection with place create something like a geotheory of genres, a specific type of supplement to Jahan Ramazani's concept of transnational poetics.⁴ In keeping with this proposition, Rybicka considers such genres or subgenres as are tied to the specific character of a place or geographical region. The interpretative capacity she foresees for this program is virtually guaranteed by its dynamic grasp of the relationship between literature and place, in terms of both local variations of the descriptive or "touristic" poem, but also such genres as the *dumka*, *bylina*, or *haiku*, that emerged from local or regional cultures. These in turn have the potential for transfer or, to refer again to Ramazani, transnationality. The question arises, however, whether the theory of genres is in fact dependent in a certain way on concrete geographic localization, since it can be transferred from one place to another. Perhaps this relates to a kind of repeatability in a territory's geographic structure, which can with much greater ease be discovered in another, similar place.

We are certainly much indebted to Rybicka's book for its popularizing tendencies: the number of theoretical concepts unfolded for or introduced to the Polish reader here is truly impressive. Particularly noteworthy

are some remarkably interdisciplinary concepts she discusses, among which the most interesting are Bertrand Westphal's notion of geocriticism, a scholarly method focusing on interactions between geographical spaces and their representations in literature, art, photography and film, and geohumanities, an American project that joins together the scholarly traditions of urbanism, literary studies, the visual arts, and the natural sciences. Rybicka's introduction and analysis of Polish spatial positions are most remarkable: from the work of her compatriot colleagues, she adduces two lines of development of the problem of space in literary studies.⁵ The first, of which Janusz Sławiński's writings are emblematic, posits the dominant of ergocentricity: a focus on the text itself and its morphology, internal cohesion within the discipline, and the treatment of literature as a linguistic phenomenon. The second dominant, traceable to the scholarship of Andrzej Borowski, attempts to juxtapose problems of language and stylistics with geographical and historical connections, and is also marked by a more open approach to the question of where the discipline's boundaries lie. This is how Rybicka sees the division between these two paths, though we should note that the complex and varied work of Sławiński, the author of "Przestrzeń w literaturze" (Space in Literature), is here reduced to a basic structural and text-centered perspective (one shared by Rybicka), though in Sławiński we also find such propositions as the following: "Poetic or narrative transcriptions of cultural models of experiencing space are found in a wide array of forms that are analogous in that respect, including geographical notations, historiographical texts, or theological treatises, to name only a few. One should go further: the problem under discussion goes beyond the world of verbal compositions, because it feeds no less on ritual manifestations, ceremonies, etiquette, games, architecture, urban studies, and also the distinct sphere of visual images: paintings, drawings, films [...]."⁶ This in fact sounds very similar to some of Rybicka's statements.

⁵ We must also note that the following scholars are mentioned: Wincenty Pol, Stefania Skwarczyńska, and Kazimierz Brakoniecki.

⁶ J. Sławiński, "Przestrzeni w literaturze" (Space in Literature), in *Próby teoretycznoliterackie* (Literary Theory Challenges), Warszawa 1992, p. 175.

⁴ J. Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics*, London 2009.

I would like to examine geopoetics as geography from two perspectives: on the one hand, as a place where two separate fields, literary studies and geography, meet; on the other hand, as an opportunity to develop a shared terminological base. Geopoetics in this view, creating new areas of consideration, naturally offers and provides new terms for literary studies (including poetics). Among these, the most intriguing are very likely narrative mapping, the literature of idiolocality, literature and reading as geographic events, literary geography of the senses, literature as a place of memory, the textures of place, and auto/bio/geo/graphy. This last category goes beyond the limits of the areas reserved for literary studies and geography, thereby proving the expansive potential of this entire scholarly approach. Auto/bio/geo/graphy situates the meaning of the experience of places and spaces for the purpose of self-knowledge at the center of its inquiry, and a singular role is played here by the tension created between localization and dislocation within a life's trajectory, the role of autobiographical places as places of both individual and cultural memory. Auto/bio/geo/graphies are situated at the heart of Rybicka's study, because they ask a question about the relationship between the local and global, the periphery and the center, movement and habitation, the areas she has explored most deeply. The concreteness of place, postulated repeatedly by the author of *Przestrzeni i miejsca we współczesnych teoriach i praktykach*, begins to slip away as space and place begin to function more like frame and instrument, taking on greater transferability and becoming submerged in constant movement.

It is thus unusually difficult to have a full, challenging and extended experience of such space, since geopoetics is also anthropology. From this perspective, two basic oppositions, habitation-movement and local-global, are inscribed in Rybicka's book, and the motto for this part could be Salman Rushdie's line, quoted by Rybicka, that "[e]verywhere [is] now a part of everywhere else."⁷ Beginning with the first pair of concepts, the dichotomy first becomes apparent in a discussion of Kenneth

White's geopoetics, a pivotal moment for Rybicka's conception. To explain the central concept, Rybicka quotes several statements by the Scottish poet, which I will permit myself to quote here: "Geopoetics [...] is the **field** of potential convergence of science, philosophy, and poetry"; "[geopoetics] means: poetics of the earth. [...] How human beings will desire and be able **to live** on earth"; "The word geopoetics contains the idea that we can **find a place for** philosophy, join **territory** with thought, nature and culture [...]."⁸ Rybicka draws out from White's discourse those features of geopoetics that consist of intellectual nomadry and convergence as well as interdisciplinarity, the concept of place in movement, transnationality, the rejection of the concept of identity, ecological thinking and the need to encompass the non-human. Only certain terms relate to the opposition of habitation and movement, but this effort she engages in suffices to clearly define the position that Rybicka is going to choose. It is worth noting that this vision of the nature of geopoetics is very selective and closer to the source of White's artistic practice, involving travel from Scotland through the Atlantic Pyrrhenees and the north coast of Brittany to the wild regions of the Americas and Asia, than his theoretical writings. The concepts that inform White's work: territory, area, and above all habitation and location, are extremely static; the aim is not to question spatiality, grasped as processes and relationships, but transferring those categories to an extended if ephemerally version of space that absorbs the subject and therefore expands in his or her vision.

Rybicka seems to surrender to the compulsion of movement.⁹ The increased possibilities of translocation that result from developments in technology lead to a compression of space. That, according to Peter

⁸ K. White, *Le lieu et la parole. Entretiens 1987-1997*, Cléguer 1997, p. 49; *Le poète cosmographe. Entretiens*, ed. M. Duclos, Bordeaux 1987, p. 123; *Poeta kosmograf*, trans. K. Brakoniecki, Olsztyn 2010, p. 68. Emphasis mine – C.R.

⁹ P. Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital: Towards a Philosophical Theory of Globalization*, Cambridge 2013. Sloterdijk writes: "in the crystallized world system, everything is subject to the compulsion of movement. Wherever one looks in the great comfort structure, one finds each and every inhabitant being urged to constant mobilization [...]." Chapter 20, "The Uncompressible, or: The Rediscovery of the Extended," p. 247.

⁷ S. Rushdie, *Shalimar the Clown*, New York 2006. Kindle edition.

Sloterdijk, author of *In the World Interior of Capital*, was supposed to be the point of the spatial revolution that shortened the way from here to there to a mere remnant and in the process brought consequences for intermediate spaces. For the German philosopher, space, as a result of this process, is treated as a dimension of negligible value, while constant motion and the demand for speed mean that the only good space is a dead one, so that space's imperceptibility and failure to register in our senses becomes its primary virtue.¹⁰ The disregarded space, seen as a distance whose only purpose is to be overcome, countries' cultures existing only to be mixed with others, finally, space as a nothingness between two electronic places leads to a situation of which Rybicka is certainly aware, but which she does not feature as a scholarly interpretation of space and place in her catalogue. What is at stake here is of course resistance to the process of reality being made unreal, the experience of what is expansive, defending ourselves against the effects of compression, abbreviation, and superficiality.¹¹ Space thus needs to be connected with the natural process of expansion.¹² "The new spatial thought is the revolt against the contracted world."¹³ That revolt can take place through suspension, backing up the opposition outlined by Rybicka, or as a new discovery of slowness, with the potential to reconcile the two opposing categories, and thus making use of the conjunctive aspect of geopoetics.¹⁴

¹⁰Ibid., p. 249.

¹¹Sloterdijk also refers here to the culture of presence, which needs to take a stronger position vis-a-vis the culture of imagination and memory. I reserve the term "culture of presence," however, for the work of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, who places it in opposition to the culture of meaning. See *ibid.*, p. 252.

¹²See *ibid.*, p. 252.

¹³See *ibid.*

¹⁴The phenomenon of nomadry is interesting to consider in this context. Sloterdijk writes: "... even those who change their residence frequently cannot avoid a habitus of dwelling on their way." (*ibid.*, p. 255.) This corresponds to White's proposition that farmsteading does not rule out movement, although Rybicka understands that idea to reveal the lack of an established relationship between habitation and stabilization and as basing the idea of place on movement and flow. We should here remember another idea from Sloterdijk, who in fact observed "mobile cocooning" among nomads, captured in the notion that travel is home (*ibid.*).

The second pair of concepts in a way represent consequences of the first pair. Rybicka, in her commentary on Piotr Piotrowski's conception, in which he attempts to describe the dynamics of artistic geography, demonstrates an ability to negotiate between local knowledge and global knowledge based on the transitivity and openness to diverse currents that are thought to typify places and space in contemporary culture. In the spatial turn, Rybicka sees the dependence of locality on relations with globalization processes, probably best captured in Doreen Massey's phrase "a global sense of place." Sloterdijk observes that misunderstandings relating to the expression "local" arise from its faulty placement as an antonym of "global" or "universal."¹⁵ The localness that the author of *Geopoetics* is writing about, as a reaction to globalization processes, should in fact emphasize not dependency, but full asymmetry; the local is one's first experience, so that the return thereto is "an intellectual event of some consequence."¹⁶ The emphasis on the local means that power shifts to internal expansion. The individual place because of its concreteness and uniqueness acts against the encroaching decontextualization, compression, and neutralization of space, and also against mapping¹⁷ understood as the projection of spatial organization of territory based on selection, by definition postulating incompleteness. Interestingly, Rybicka's belief in the homogeneously transitive and migrational nature of space collapses in the face of numerous challenges. This results from her acceptance of a twofold image of space in light of her previous categorization of it as a transitional, nomadic entity. Her retreat from the nomadic is visible in her reflections on the category of the fictional character within the poetological aspect of geopoetics.. Rybicka proposes to look at contemporary nomadic protagonists who return to the places they came from and thus decide on stability, giving up their previous lives of displacement. This happens in the works of Joanna Bator, Inga Iwasiów, and Huberta Klimko-Dobrzaniecki. Similar conclusions can be observed in Rybicka's commentary on the ideas of Anna

¹⁵Ibid., p. 253.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

Nacher, for whom the growing role of geomeia and literary cartography and their influence in both theory and cultural practices represents “a return to location and the concreteness of real localization.” Finally, localization triumphs due to the practicality of geopoetics understood as an active approach by readers in connection with localized reading. This model of reception is grounded in the geographical context, and the text and its reception become a geographical event and indissolubly linked with the local.

Geopoetics as performativity in the end accents the creative potential of literary *poesis* and its capacity to elicit change; geopoetics deals with three aspects: world-creation, relating to the production of both worlds both real and fictional, meaning-creation, developing interpretations that facilitate a spatial orientation, and event-creation, for situations in which the act of reading becomes a geographical occurrence. World-creation, since it is not a consequence of the meaning-creating aspect of geopoetics, allows the demarcation of a clear division. If the meanings created by and surrounding us do not form our reality, world-creation may be juxtaposed with the concrete materiality and presence of the subject in the world. This Bergonesque sketch shows that meaning-creation based on the culture of meaning and logos will have different sources than world-creation viewed as the creation of a certain real event based on contact, palpability, and above all, simultaneous and topographically identical presence of subject and place. Such a formulation corresponds to the distinction between the cultures of meaning and presence proposed by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, creator of a literary studies project that examines literature as a kind of “product of presence.” It is thus possible to link this idea with Rybicka’s scholarly approach. The culture of meaning, as represented by her, would thus confront the individual with a world converted into signs, positing existence in that world as an unending process of interpretation that explicates the relations connecting individual elements. The culture of presence, on the other hand, does not look for meanings, but desires to experience presence: in place of plot tensions and the link between cause and effect, we are given the opportunity to experience

the simultaneity of certain phenomena.¹⁸ In the context of geopoetics, this will involve direct, intense contact with a particular place, and also encountering its presence as multiple layers, through the palimpsest aspect of space. This will, then, entail the revelation that what is experienced is not only a sign, but beyond its sign-value constitutes something substantial, material.¹⁹

We find one example of such an articulation in the book *Ghosts of Home. The Afterlife of Czernowitz in Jewish Memory*²⁰ by Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, in which Hirsch, who developed the concept of post-memory, visits her parents’ native city, but in fact primarily completes a journey between concept (the culture of the sign) and experience, the latter in this case including a physical process of overcoming the intergenerational transmission of a traumatic past (the culture of presence).²¹ The practical aspect, corresponding to the principles of geopoetics, here signifies the desire to inscribe memory in a particular topography, a feeling of communion with historical space that awakens a need to return to the source. It thus turns out that cartography, an area belonging to the culture of the sign, is an uncertain and illusory source of knowledge about the structural dynamics and shape of a city, which becomes completely unidentifiable.²² Walking practices of the type developed by Michel de Certeau are closer in spirit to play, and thus duplication of presence, than to language. Presence can thus be linked to the bodily; in her commentary on *Ghosts of Home*, Aleksandra Ubertowska, notes how closely linked Hirsch’s anthropology of memory is with the body – the memory of a place, but more broadly, of the experience of a place, becomes much more prominent than narrative in “somatic writing”: in the sensation

¹⁸See H.U. Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence, What Meaning Cannot Convey*, Stanford 2004 and T. Mizerkiewicz, *Po tamtej stronie tekstów. Literatura polska a nowoczesna kultura obecności* (Beyond Texts. Polish Literature and the Modern Culture of Presence), Poznań 2013, pp. 180-181.

¹⁹See Mizerkiewicz, *Po tamtej stronie tekstów*, pp. 189-190.

²⁰M. Hirsch, L. Spitzer, *Ghosts of Home. The Afterlife of Czernowitz in Jewish Memory*, London 2010.

²¹See A. Ubertowska, “Praktykowanie postpamięci. Marianne Hirsch i fotograficzne widma z Czernowitza” (Marianne Hirsch’s Practice of Post-memory and the Photographic Phantom from Czernowitz), *Teksty Drugie* (Second Texts) 2013, 4, p. 269.

²²See *ibid.*, p. 274.

of hands touching a tile stove or the feeling of fatigue after a visit to a cemetery lasting many hours.²³

In *Geopoetics* we find examples of that kind of non-textual and non-semasiological approach to space. One of them is certainly Tadeusz Ślawek's concept of *genius loci*, by which he proposes "making space a partner in my existence; what is more, in this 'silent' conversation it often becomes clear that spaces do not need me and my order of things."²⁴ The exciting and dizzying simultaneity of so many phenomena exposes the inadequacy of anthropocentric categories, and the culture of the sign is, after all, a pre-eminently human achievement. Place is shown as an active partner in an encounter, which may be resistant to semiotic ownership, even rendering it impossible. That is the gist of the most contemporary reflection on the topic of *geo-poesis* understood as two-sided, human-spatial causative activity.

²³See *ibid.*, p. 276.

²⁴T. Ślawek, "Genius loci jako doświadczenie. Prolegomena" (Genius Loci as Experience. Prolegomena), in *Genius loci. Studia o człowieku w przestrzeni* (Genius Loci. Studies on Humanity in Space), ed. Z. Kadłubek, Katowice 2007, p. 5.

KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT:

This review traces the recent vicissitudes of the term “geopoetics.” The purpose of the article is to situate the scholarly concept developed by Elżbieta Rybicka in the context of previous studies of space. Using her proposed framework of geopoetics, theoretical work on space is broken down into its poetological, geographical, anthropological, and performative aspects. Geopoetics becomes juxtaposed with the spatial thought of Peter Sloterdijk (proliferating space) and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s “culture of space,” allowing reflection on space to be expanded to include a non-anthropocentric interpretation of the humanities.

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