The Polish School of Fabrication:

Literary Travel Reportage. Ziemowit Szczerek's Journeys from Mordor to the Intermarium

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In the realm of theory, travel literature remains a somewhat obscure phenomenon. It is genealogically diverse and its long tradition reaches back to antiquity, having passed through several cultural transformations along the way.[1] To further complicate things, the genre includes a vast range of texts that are fundamentally disparate in terms of their themes, narrative modes, and their relationship to the reality they portray: this spectrum includes everything from Homer's *Odyssey* to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Kerouac's beatnik novel *On the Road,* not to mention purely fantastical voyages to the cosmos like Lem's phenomenal *Star Diaries*. In this article, I focus on the similarly nuanced conception of travel embodied in the work of Ziemowit Szczerek. The primary poetological context for Szczerek's body of work is travel reportage: the very genre that shaped the twentieth-century model for narrating travel. In fact, travel literature criticism often identifies reportage as a genealogical qualifier for the genre. The fundamental issue at stake here is the unresolved debate over the relationship between authenticity (referentiality) and fiction in travel reportage framed as literature.

Truth and Fabrication

There seems to be a prevailing consensus that travel reportage should be particularly reliable in the authenticity of its accounts, that it should recapitulate facts and describe places truthfully, down to the most minute detail. This expectation stems from the factuality gener-

[1] Dorota Kozicka discusses the theoretical issue of how to classify travel literature in the first part her study *Wędrowcy światów prawdziwych. Dwudziestowieczne relacje z podróży,* Krakow 2003

ally assigned to reportage as its defining feature, which is a result of the genre's roots in the press and the strong, ongoing tendency to identify its many variations with news on current events. If we locate this issue in its broader context, we might approach this question by thinking about the relationship between literature and documentary art. I assessing the literary tenor of reportage, we often classify it as a borderline, paraliterary genre, although its literary qualities are generally limited to the text's aesthetic, stylistic and compositional structure, the vividness of the prose, and a characteristic yearning for universal meaning. This being said, you could search reference books exhaustively for an entry on "literary reportage" and come up empty-handed. At best, this issue surfaces in the context of general reflections on the "literature of fact."[2] Genre definitions of reportage tend to feature media studies perspectives that emphasize authenticity as the genre's constitutive feature and therefore define reportage as non-fiction prose. This entry from the *Lexicon of Media Terms (Słownik terminologii medialnej*) expresses this notion through categorical claims:

> The journalistic text is defined by the authenticity of its message: its function is to convey the facts as a report would, without superfluous literary artistry. [...] There is no room for literary fiction in reportage. In this genre, authenticity does not only entail the responsibility to report; first and foremost, it requires the reporter to describe reality without fabricating facts. These facts should be fully verifiable, for a reporter is responsible for the content he conveys, even before a court.[3]

The author of a theoretical approach to reportage argues in the same vein:

> Reportage, strictly speaking, must not avail itself of fiction and must rule out fabrication. Fiction penned by a reporter can only be a testament of his incompetence and his inability to get a hold of the facts. It is also an abuse of the convention. Authenticity is also a prerequisite for contemporary reportage expressed through other media.[4]

This position is rather prevalent in scholarship on the subject. Critics assert the consensus that the defining feature of traditional reportage is in fact this "referential contract" established with the reader,[5] also described as the "factographic pact."[6] The author of the genre's entry in the *Lexicon of Literary Terms* (*Słownik terminów literackich*) takes a much more liberal approach to the matter. He identifies variations within reportage "that link authentic material to narrative fiction [...]. Modern reportage has absorbed many experiences from narrative

[2] See U. Glensk, *O estetyce literatury faktu*, [in:] *Słownik terminologii medialnej*, ed. W. Pisarek, Krakow 2006, p. 186.

[3] K. Wolny-Zmorzyński, A. Kaliszewski, *Reportaż*, [in:] *Słownik terminologii medialnej*, ed. W. Pisarek, Krakow 2006, p. 186.

[4] E. Pleszkun-Olejniczakowa, *Reportaż. Wokół pochodzenia, definicji i podziałów*, "Acta Universitatis Lodziensis. Folia Litteraria Polonica" 2005, vol. 7, p. 9.

[5] This phrase borrows Philippe Lejeune's formulation, offering a counterpart to his widely known "autobiographical pact." A recent study on literary reportage uses this idea as the basis of its theoretical approach. See: P. Zajas, *Jak świat prawdziwy stał się bajką. O literaturze niefikcjonalnej*, Poznan 2011, pp. 9-35.

[6] This phrase also references Lejeune. See: Z. Bauer, *Gatunki dziennikarskie*, [in:] *Dziennikarstwo i świat mediów*, ed. Z. Bauer, E. Chudziński, Krakow 2004. Similar nomenclature appears in reporters' statements. See: P. Nesterowicz, *Reportaż to kontrakt prawdy. Ufam ci, że tak było*, "Gazeta Wyborcza" 13 VI 2015, http://wyborcza.pl/magazyn/1,124059,18101750,Reportaz_to_kontrakt_prawdy__Ufam_ci__ze_tak_bylo.html.

prose, and particularly from the novel and novelistic forms [...]."[7] Jacek Maziarski similarly acknowledges the genre's literary provenances. For Maziarski, the genre is authentic as a rule, but expresses that authenticity through the mediation of tactics for instilling belief in the reader, in some ways generating a "reality effect." On the other hand, for this theoretical view of reportage, the issue of authenticity is secondary:

> For the reportage critic, whether or not the situations narrated through the prose are true is a matter of secondary importance. More weight is given to an evaluation of the account's "features" of truthfulness or its deliberate construction to produce an appearance of truthfulness. For their remains no doubt — reportage can be based to a lesser or greater degree on fictional events, only portraying people in silhouettes, concocted in the author's imagination or generalized from a hundred individual incidents.[8]

This sentiment leads the scholar to a general definition of reportage in which certain literary trademarks also play a constitutive role:

Reportage is an intersectional genre that straddles journalistic and literary forms, yet seems to lean towards the literary. Its employment of plot, narrative and its constituent parts, intense visuality and literary framing brings the text closer to narrative prose.[9]

For the most part, this attentiveness to the literary valences of reportage and its refined devices of fictionalization are a hallmark of recent studies. It seems to come up particularly in the analysis of Polish reportage of the last quarter century in reference to reporters who labor rigorously to remain faithful to authenticity (such as Wojciech Jagielski), and creative writers like Jacek Hugo-Bader and Mariusz Szczygieł, whose reportage can undoubtedly be described as literary.[10] Both scholars and the authors themselves have noted the rising tendency to publish reportage in collections, which encourages readers to perceive it as literature. More and more often, the very texts are conceived in the format of single-theme books and demonstrate an increasing flair for artistry.

Literary critics on the subject also advocate for these disparate positions: some embrace the genre's literary status (e.g. Henryk Berez) while others reject it (e.g. Andrzej Kijowski), and still others occupy a place on the spectrum between these extremes. This range not only reflects critics' personal hierarchies of aesthetic values and views on the borders of literature;

[7] J. Sławiński, *Reportaż*, [in:] *Słownik terminów literackich*, ed. J. Sławiński, Wrocław 1989, p. 431.

[8] J. Maziarski, *Anatomia reportażu*, Krakow 1966, p. 16. In this study, Maziarski expresses his reluctance to rigorously embrace authenticity and deny the genre the right to fiction, which would do a disservice to the work.

[9] J. Maziarski, *Reportaż*, [in:] *Słownik rodzajów i gatunków literackich*, ed. G. Gazda, S. Tynecka-Makowska, Krakow 2006, p. 635.

[10] See I. Adamczewska, *Granice kreatywności w reportażu*, "Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich" 2017, vol. 1; J. Biernacka, *Fikcja narracji, czyli o mniej konwencjonalnej formie fikcji we współczesnym polskim reportażu*, "Tekstualia" 2016 issue 4; K. Frukacz, *Między literackością a podmiotowością. Nowy wymiar "skażenia" polskiego reportażu*, "Postscriptum Polonistyczne" 2013, issue 1; K. Szcześniak, *Między reportażem a literaturą. Twórczość Wojciecha Tochmana*, Lublin 2016; M. Zimnoch, *Fikcja jako prawda. Referencyjność reportażu ponowoczesnego*, "Naukowy Przegląd Dziennikarski" 2012, issue 1; and by the same author, *Poetyka reportażu intertekstualnego na przykładzie tekstów Mariusza Szczygła*, "Jednak Książki. Gdańskie Czasopismo Humanistyczne" 2016, issue 5.

it also expresses the genre's historical entanglement (e.g. the specter of its socialist realist iteration).[11] It goes without saying that the authors themselves are just as polarized. In fact, the "godfather" of global reportage, Egon Erwin Kisch, proposed joining reportage to literature long ago, and even defended its right to fully make use of fictional elements. The same view was espoused later on by celebrated literary figures and practitioners of the genre such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Bruce Chatwin.

In the Polish sphere, Melchior Wańkowicz alone asserted the genre's right to literary creativity. He explicitly wrote about the "privilege of fiction" and cultivated a fiction-generating practice in his own work.[12] We might also identify a literary basis in the work of the author who succeeded Wańkowicz as the reigning progenitor of literary reportage: Ryszard Kapuściński. This orientation stands out, however, for those who read his texts as literary scholars, for even Kapuściński himself (unlike Wańkowicz) never confessed to taking major liberties in his descriptions of reality.

While the literariness of reportage is no longer such a controversial topic, and the very idea has now been sanctioned by a host of prestigious awards (the Nobel Literary Prize in 2015, the Nike Prize in 2017), the inclusion of fictional elements in reportage remains provocative. Resistance to the fictional seems linked to the fear that it might threaten the very factuality that defines the genre. Even putting aside the inclusion of purely fictional elements, any attempt to stray from authenticity or misrepresent or even omit the facts provokes protest and demands for rectification.

The vigorous public debate over Artur Domosławski's book on Kapuściński (*Kapuściński non-fiction,* Warsaw 2010) is related to this controversy.[13] Since the book's publication, there has been a resurgence of the attitude that reportage must be purified of all creative and fictional elements. This stance seems symptomatic of an anxiety that the literary will "contaminate" reportage. Its advocates call for declarative prose in the spirit of non-fiction. Scholars who work on contemporary reportage argue, however, that this is a form of self-deception. If nothing else, this declarative mode stems from a theoretically obsolete dichotomy that puts literary fiction and authenticity in opposition with one another. In other words, it stems from a rather unsophisticated understanding of mimesis (representation) and a faith in nonliterary style as a reliable and "true" expression of reality.[14] This position is rooted in a tendency to impose ethical categories on aesthetic ones ("fabrication" would apparently weaken the journalist's professional ethics). Surely, this reflects a response to the increasing performativity of the

[11]See: J. Jezierska-Hałady, "*Literacenie? O granicach reportażu na łamach Rocznika Literackiego" (1932-1984)*, "Jednak Książki. Gdańskie Czasopismo Humanistyczne" 2016, issue 5.

[12]Wańkowicz collected these articles in the fifth chapter (titled *Poszerzenie konwencji reportażu*) of his metaprosaic great work– *Karafki La Fontaine'a*. Other writers of the genre such as Krzysztof Kąkolewski adopted very different views. See: K. Kąkolewski, *Reportaż* [in:] *Teoria i praktyka dziennikarstwa. Wybrane zagadnienia*, ed. B. Golka, M. Kafel, Z. Mitzner, Warsaw 1964.

[13]P. Zajas and G. Wołowiec discuss the first wave of reception for this biography in the journal "Teksty Drugie" 2011, issues 1-2.

[14]See J. Landwehr, *Fikcyjność i fikcjonalność*, trans. A. Nasiłowska, "Pamiętnik Literacki" 1983, vol. 4. The theoretical implications of the question of representation are addressed in M. P. Markowski's text, *O reprezentacji*, [in:] *Kulturowa teoria literatury. Główne pojęcia i problemy*, ed. M. P. Markowski, R. Nycz, Krakow 2006.

genre's unrivaled capacity to impact reality in comparison to its literary counterparts. One consequence of this mindset is a totalizing insistence on fact checking, or the verification of a work's sources and circumstances as proof. This impulse, at least in part, is driven by a fear of legal consequences.

In the latest phase of the discussion that has circulated since Domosławski's publication, Mariusz Szczgieł has taken a dissenting position, distancing himself from a strict approach to (literary) reportage. He voiced these views in an article polemicizing with those who chastised the "Polish School of Reportage" for straying too far from the facts. This provoked a debate, prompting Adam Leszczyński to pen an article with the telling title *The Polish School of Fabrication* (a title I borrow polemically for this article), in which he cites many instances of journalistic abuse.[15] The dialogue that then ensues reinforces the opposition between "literature" and "documentary." What's more, writers themselves take up this position, while until that time, this relationship had been reversed. Interactions between literary and documentary genres, contemporary "silvae rerum" (home chronicles), textual hybrids, Konwicki's "lie-diaries" and so on all produced a climate in which this opposition seems radically anachronistic, and has seemed so since the 1980s.[16]

I will briefly recapitulate the positions against embracing the literary status (fictionality in particular) of reportage, along with the most recent statements on the subject, for we find these same concerns (or their lack) in the reception of travel literature, particularly in response to work by Andrzej Stasiuk or Ziemowit Szczerek that is glossed as reportage. Stasiuk, who is known for his book *On the Road to Babadag* (*Jadąc do Babadag*), made a distinct effort to frame his output as literary prose. Stasiuk even contributed to the debate surrounding Domosławski's book. Right after Kapuściński's biography came out, Stasiuk offered a commentary that could easily be applied to his own work:

> He should have realized that we live in a time of intersecting genres— in hybridized times. [...] Since the novel's form has changed, why should reportage remain static and therefore ultimately condemned to go obsolete? He should also have noticed that our lives are changing radically. Every day they become more and more fictional. For he has seen, after all, that with increasing frequency we interact with images and phantoms and fata morganas. That gradually, we are leaving reality behind — or at the very least, reality in its former, archaic sense: a reality that could be grasped through direct contact. In the act of traveling, for instance. Or through a traveler's stories. Truth has wandered off into the past. Why demand it of the journalist, since we don't even demand it of

[15]See: M. Szczygieł, *Reporter, czyli koleżanka z ZUS-u*, "Duży Format," supplement to "Gazeta Wyborcza" from May 22 2017, issue 19 [Online title: *Co wolno reporterowi. Mariusz Szczygieł odpowiada krytykom polskiej szkoły reportażu*, http://wyborcza.pl/duzyformat/7,127290,21833806,co-wolno-reporterowi-mariusz-szczygiel-odpowiada-krytykom.html]; L. Włodek, A. Domosławski, *Reporter w czasach ściemy. Polemika z Mariuszem Szczygłem*, "Duży Format", supplement to "Gazeta Wyborcza" from June 5 2017, issue 21 [http://wyborcza.pl/duzyformat/7,127290,21896617,reporter-w-czasach-sciemy-polemika-z-mariuszem-szczyglem.html]; A. Leszczyński, *Polska szkoła zmyślania*, "Krytyka Polityczna", http://krytykapolityczna.pl/kultura/czytaj-dalej/leszczynski-polska-szkola-zmyslania/; W. Szabłowski, *Jak pracować na zaufanie czytelników. Szabłowski odpowiada Leszczyńskiemu*, "Krytyka Polityczna," http://krytykapolityczna.pl/kultura/czytaj-dalej/jak-pracowac-na-zaufanie-czytelnikow-szablowski-odpowiada-leszczynskiemu/; L. Ostałowska, *O polskiej szkole reportażu rozmawiajmy bez złości*, "Duży Format", supplement to "Gazeta Wyborcza" from June 12 2017, issue 22 [http://wyborcza.pl/duzyformat/7,127290,21927454,o-polskiej-szkole-reportazu-rozmawiajmy-bez-zlosci.html].

[16]See: Z. Ziątek, *Wiek dokumentu. Inspiracje dokumentarne w polskiej prozie współczesnej*, Warsaw 1999.

> ourselves, reconciled as we are to the notion of personal, discrete truths? Which is to say, truths that are entirely individual and impossible to replicate.[17]

The question of reportage's *Dichtung und Wahrheit* seems particularly relevant in the case of work by Ziemowit Szczerek. Although Szczerek's books may recall Stasiuk's *Dojczland*, they offer a distinctly phantasmagoric vision of cultural space in which heterostereotypes and autostereotypes have a heavy hand in shaping our impressions of other nationalities. While imitating the referential writing style of travel reportage, Szczerek boldly ventures into the terrain of literature. To this end, he plays upon precedents set by Stasiuk and also riffs on American New Journalism, particularly its "gonzo" variation.

Ziemowit Szczerek entered the literary scene with his book published in early 2013, *Mordor's Coming to Eat Us: A Secret History of the Slavs* (*Przyjdzie Mordor i nas zje, czyli tajan historia Słowian*). The author's next book appeared that same year, titled *Triumphant Republic: An Alternative History of Poland* (*Rzeczpospolita zwycięska. Alternatywna historia Polski*)**. This book is written in the newly popular genre of alternative history, and offers alternative scenarios of Poland's outcomes in several wars. One year later, Szczerek's road novel** *Highway No. 7* **(***Siodemka***) came out, which treats contemporary themes with a vivid flare for alternative fantasy. Towards the end of 2015, Szczerek published a new book that revisits the theme of his Ukrainian wanderings, titled** *Tattoo with a Trident* **(***Tatuaż z tryzubem***), and in late spring of 2017 his most recent book came out, titled** *Intermarium: Travels through the Real and Imagined Central Europe***.**

For the purposes of this article, I am particularly interested in the books concerning Ukraine (*Mordor's Coming…, Tattoo with a Trident*) alongside *Intermarium* as texts that closely resemble travel literature. Szczerek's debut novel won him the attention of critics and readers. The author came from a background in journalism and political punditry, with a special focus on issues of Central Europe and its Eastern frontier.[18] His devotion to the subject earned him the prestigious Polityka Passport Award in the literature category in 2013 and a nomination for the Nike Prize in 2014. *Tattoo with a Trident* was also shortlisted for the Nike Prize in 2016.

As a rule, both of Szczerek's Ukrainian books are glossed as literary takes on travel reportage. Their composition is episodic, consisting of a dozen or so chapters that all function as standalone tales of the protagonist's wanderings. The two books are very different from one another, however, and *Tattoo with a Trident* can hardly be read as a continuation of Szczerek's debut book. The protagonist of *Tattoo…* offers a broad perspective on travel: sections resembling reportage are intertwined with substantive reflections on history, politics and culture, offering their own commentary on the descriptions of events and places. *Mordor's Coming…* is

[17]A. Stasiuk, *A jeśliby nawet to wszystko zmyślił*, "Gazeta Wyborcza" March 2 2010, http://wyborcza.pl/1,75410,7615303,Stasiuk__A_jesliby_nawet_to_wszystko_zmyslil.html.

[18]With Marcin Kępa, Ziemowit Szczerek co-authored a collection of stories called *Paczka radomskich* in 2010. (I treat *Mordor's Coming…* as his true debut as an author, although he also published his early experiments in literary prose in literary journals and on the cultural hub e-splot.pl, where he published his (unfinished) road novel called *Countries that Don't Exist* serially in 2011. The standalone debut of Ziemowit Szczerek (b. 1978) came about rather late in his career, for he belongs to a generation that literary critics had already dubbed "Children of the 70s" ("*roczniki siedemdziesiąte*") by the beginning of this decade.

more of a picaresque road novel, while *Tattoo*… veers in the direction of a deep cultural travel essay. Most importantly, the more recent book was written after Euromaidan, a wave of anti-state acts of civil disobedience in Ukraine that lasted several months and brought about the collapse of the government and Ukraine's total geopolitical reorientation. Euromaidan also triggered the secession of insurgent Eastern regions, Russia's annexation of Crimea, and a *de facto* war with the Russian offensive. These dramatic events are reflected in *Tattoo*… and surely provided an impetus for the book's deeper historical and political analyses.

Intermarium can be described as a travel account of several nations of East and Central Europe complete with a deep historical-political analysis in the vein of *Tattoo with a Trident* and searing commentary on recent political events. All of this is gathered under the political concept of Intermarium called out in the book's title.

Authenticity in Travel and Cultural Hallucination

Ziemowit Szczerek's three books discussed here can be linked to the boom of literary reportage that has dominated Polish publishing over the last dozen or so years: entire publishing imprints have surfaced to represent this mode (one of which published *Tattoo*…). Dozens of new books of travel literature come out every year. Even a cursory glace at Szczerek's oeuvre gives the impression that it draws from a diverse range of literary traditions and represents a hybrid form woven from intertextual references to all subgenres of travel literature. Szczerek's prose can, however, claim one specific source of inspiration which puts him in dialogue with a cultural trend widespread in Poland since the 1920s. I am referring to the phenomenon of alternative, unorganized and niche tourism, conducted on one's own. This is the practice of exploring with a simple backpack, using local transportation or hitchhiking (in the West, this is called "backpacking"). These practices imbue the journey with a sense of originality, or a sense that the experiences accumulated are unique. This form of travel seems to be a signature experience of Szczerek's generation.[19] Until recently, this mode of travel was barely acknowledged in socio-cultural studies, although it has undoubtedly exerted a formative influence on the young Polish intelligentsia.[20]

Ziemowit Szczerek reproduces all the major iconic elements of the Pole's journey through Ukraine. *Intermarium* also captures echoes of likeminded explorations of East and Central Europe. The first chapter of *Mordor's Coming*… tells the story of the author's first trip in 2002, during which he collected typical interactions with the "exotic Eastern Other:" the quintessential experience of getting around on local mini-busses (*marshrutkas*), spotting an abacus at a shop counter, the dearth of nightlife after 10:00 pm, or sampling local drinks such

[19]"*Mordor* is also a blow at myself, for I am one of those people who journeyed off to Ukraine with a backpack, subconsciously in pursuit of the 'hardcore.'"– Z. Szczerek, *Synowie buraczanych pól*, interview with J. Sobolewska, "Polityka" February 4 2014. http://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kultura/paszporty/1569197,2,rozmowa-z-ziemowitem-szczerkiem.read.

[20]The first comprehensive analyses of this trend appeared in the books: A. Horolets, *Konformizm, bunt, nostalgia. Turystyka niszowa do krajów byłego ZSRR*, Krakow 2013; A. Bachórz, *Rosja w tekście i doświadczeniu. Analiza współczesnych polskich relacji z podróży*, Krakow.2013. Both books are discussed in this article: T. Zarycki, *Socjologia polskich podróży do krajów byłego ZSRR. Dwa przykłady*, "Kultura i Społeczeństwo" 2016, issue 1.

as "dzhintonik," vodka drunken with sourdough yeast, and the high-proof herbal tincture known as Vigor balsam. This last product is a defining signature of Szczerek's first Ukrainian book and comes up constantly in the book's reviews and author interviews.[21] The first city these wanderers encounter is usually Lviv, and the encounter involves a reckoning with the city's incompatible identities: its contemporary Ukrainian identity, and its former identity as part of the Polish *Kresy* (the Polish borderlands). This second identity is cultivated by the nostalgic pilgrimages of "mainstream" Polish tourists, and cleverly role-played by Lviv's Polish community. Szczerek comments on this phenomenon in a series of hyperbolic scenes. This excerpt offers an example:

> Aging Poles waddled around the market square, locals and tourists alike. You can tell the two groups apart no problem. The visitors trudged around slowly [...] and whined in a whisper. Their fear, however, was expressed rather loudly. They had all these pretensions that they've been fucked over, damaged, by the UPA, by Bandera...They moaned about Yalta, Stalin... They droned on about Szczepcio and Tońcio...The local Poles, on the other hand, moved about jerkily [...] approaching the people around them to see if they didn't need an apartment to rent, or perhaps a map with Polish street names. And for a little bonus, they'd throw in some disparaging words about the evil Ukrainians and the grandeur of the old Commonwealth. And the Poles from Poland lapped up these flattering fibs from the Polish Ukrainians like baby guppies. All it takes is for a local Pole to go up to them, tell them a tale or two from prewar Lviv, hum the tune *On a rainy, gloomy day*... and say "Feel like to be at home, for its your city ain't it, too..." and already the Poles from Poland have burst into tears, already they've completely lost it, they're all over the place, it's like they've been hit by a car, already their weeping, it's flying out of their nose, they're pawing for their wallets, they've already bought maps, guidebooks, rented an apartment... [MC, p. 12-13].[22]

In both books, the author distances himself from this nostalgia for the Polish *Kresy*, framing this history as a distinct source of nationalist hostilities and a tool by which Poles orientalize Ukraine (in Said's sense of the word). It turns out, however, that even niche tourism, which seeks an experience of authenticity beyond the guidebooks and is fascinated by the cultural difference encountered in Ukrainian space, is by no means innocent of its own set of clichés. While the protagonist of *Mordor's Coming*... seems well aware of the artificial and indecent behavior of both Polish typologies described in the passage, he himself reproduces the signature conventions of so many travel accounts (the border, the mini-busses, Lviv, abacuses, Vigor balsam, etc...) and more deeply veiled beliefs on cultural difference. *Mordor's Coming*... narrates the protagonist's process of deconstructing his biased cultural gaze — for these biases are by no means absent from alternative tourism. Szczerek is not only addressing the dubious authenticity of a private experience of travel bogged down in redundant identity questions; he is exploring the cultural baggage travelers (mostly hailing from the young intelligentsia) bring with them. The most-cited passage from *Mordor's Coming*... is perhaps the chapter in which the vagabond heroes come across some pretentious Polish literature students making a pilgrimage to Drohobycz "to pay tribute to the great Polish-Jewish writer, the grand master

[21]The Ukrainian balsam "Vigor" is sold only in pharmacies and is used locally as a medicine (for potency, as we find out in the book). It was in fact very popular at one point among this class of Polish tourists.

[22]I will indicate citations from *Mordor's Coming..., Tattoo with a Trident,* and *Intermarium* in the body of the text with the abbreviations MC, TT and I.

of the Polish language [...] To pay homage, and, of course, to find the Street of Crocodiles."[23]

Mordor's Coming... offers a wide panorama of "backpackers'" anecdotes throughout Ukraine, replete with their signature drunken decadence, pretensions, and tendencies to exoticize this new reality. The protagonist/narrator confesses to traveling in this same style, although his portraits have an irreverent and disillusioned tone. For example, here he describes the attitude of his travel companion, a photographer named Korwaks who purportedly documents life in the Ukrainian countryside to give himself a "broader cultural context," but in reality, is after something else: "They turned Ukraine into a brothel on wheels. Although they would never admit to as much." [MC, p. 122]. Upon their return, the itinerant cultural critics organize a public exhibition of their photographs:

> Korwaks and his friends spoke of the dignity and honor of the people of the poor East, and meanwhile crowd of cultural critics looked at photos of children splashing with pigs in the mud. Korwaks and his friends said that a proud, courageous people live in the East while in the photo, a drunken *babushka* lying passed-out on the ground by a roadside altar, with her legs spread no less. And everyone sees the *babushka* passed out with her legs spread wide, with no proud or courageous nation in sight. These are beautiful and worthy people, declare Korwaks and his friends. "They have a splendid history, a splendid tradition: and here's Wasia, a tractor driver, wasted as can be, sunburnt mug, a cigarette butt in his snout, and behind him in the distance rise the wooden shacks of the Soviet communal farms and a mob of half-zombie children that look like they're from some piece of Nazi propaganda. And the whole club crowded with cultural critics stares at Wasia, gulps down Wasia, and then, in a discussion led by Korwaks and his friends, they too speak of the dignity of Wasia, his history, his tradition... [MC, pp. 122-3].

Even the book's first pages ridicule characters smitten with the Ukrainian situation — this time, the critique is voiced by a young Ukrainian woman:

> "Why do you come here, you Poles [...] You come here because in other countries they laugh at you. And they think of you the same way as you think about us: as a backward shit-hole you can sneer at. And feel superior towards. [...] Because everyone thinks you're impoverished, Eastern trash. [...] Not just the Germans, but also the Czechs, even the Slovaks and the Hungarians. You only think the Hungarians are such fucking awesome pals of yours. But in fact they make fun of you just like everyone else. Not to mention the Serbs and the Croats. Even the Lithuanians, pal. Everyone thinks you're just a slightly different version of Russia. The third world. It's only here that you can be patronizing. Here you make up for the fact that everywhere else they wipe their asses with you." [MC, p. 37][24]

One reviewer has suggested that *Mordor's Coming...* is perhaps the first Polish postcolonial novel. This assessment feels apt, for the author himself explicitly references this trope. The last chapter bears the title *Orientalism* and narrates a dispute between the Polish protagonist

[23]From an excerpt of *Mordor's Coming...* translated by Scotia Gilroy and published in Asymptote Journal, https://www.asymptotejournal.com/nonfiction/ziemowit-szczerek-mordors-coming-to-eat-us-a-secret-history-of-the-slavs/ (March 18 2018).

[24]From Scotia Gilroy's translation

and his Ukrainian friend about cultural feelings of superiority. This final shift in the protagonist, a journalist-buffoon in constant pursuit of extreme adventures, indicates his disavowal of his orientalist perspective and colonial gaze on the cultural space he describes. The closing scene of *Mordor's Coming…* is memorable: in this chapter, the protagonist crosses the border as he did in the book's opening, now heading in the opposite direction. The emotions that accompany his border crossing are also new: most crucial is his feeling of shame:

> At the border, I showed my Press Pass to the Ukrainian border guard in the hopes that he might let me skip the cavalcade of ants. I rushed past the Ukrainians. At the Polish checkpoint I went up to the gate marked "EU Citizens Only." I glanced at the next gate, the gate for the worse-off, for the subnations, where the border guards harassed an older Ukrainian man. He was tall, gray-haired and had an elegantly trimmed beard. He said he was a writer and that he was traveling to Krakow for a reading. He said all this, mind you, in impeccable Polish. The border guards, mere twenty-something kids, spoke to him brusquely using the informal "you" and asked why he wasn't traveling to promote his book in Kiev. I clenched my fists and felt ashamed. So very fucking ashamed." [MC, pp. 220-221]

It is only in the postcolonial context introduced by the ending (which is entirely realist in its portrait of Polish border guards) that the tone of the book's opening epigraph finally becomes legible:

> *I am sorry, gentlemen. I am very sorry. Things should not have happened this way.*
> Józef Piłsudski to Ukrainians screwed over by the Commonwealth. Internment Camp in Szczypiorno, 1921 [MC, p. 5].

Piłsudski's words here reference the Poles' violation of the agreements between Ukrainians who fought alongside Poles "for our freedom and yours," against the Russians in the Polish-Soviet War. The Polish-Russian armistice not only signaled the total failure of Piłsudski's dream for a federation between Poland and an independent Belarus and Ukraine — it also signified the end of the Ukrainian dream for independence. As a result, *Mordor's Coming…* is not so much (or not only) a piece of pseudo-reportage imitating the various tales of young Polish tourists wandering throughout Ukraine. One might call it an attempt at cultural revisionism that seeks to break Poland's dominant narrative modes about Ukraine: tales of the Polish *Kresy*, travel tales, and political narratives.[25] The author's commentary also explicitly addresses this issue:

> On the road to Ukraine, consciously or otherwise, we take a good hard look at our Polishness. For this feeling of superiority we feel towards the East (situating ourselves as the West, somewhat

[25]In what is perhaps the first academic attempt to analyze *Mordor's Coming…,* Joanna Szydłowska astutely notes the disgrace of Polish geopolitical sentiments and their exoticizing gaze. Szydłowska does not, however, appreciate the narrative's distanced and ironic optics towards the excesses of travel, and the articulation we find in the epigraph and ending of feelings of shame and transformation in the hero/narrator/author. I therefore feel reluctant to concede the scholar's claim that: "The reader must resolve for herself if it is an eccentric lunatic who is telling this tale, or perhaps a cynic or nihilist."– J. Szydłowska, *O pożytkach z podglądania marginesu, czyli po co centrom peryferie. Egzotyzacja świata w prozie reportażowej Ziemowita Szczerka ("Przyjdzie Mordor i nas zje, czyli tajna historia Słowian)*, [in:] *Centra – peryferie w literaturze polskiej XX i XXI wieku*, ed. W. Browarny, D. Lisak-Gębala, E. Rybicka, Krakow 2015, p. 386.

> without cause) is something that's passed down from generation to generation in our national mythology. Even if you say you're only going there to pay tribute to the beautiful city of Lviv. In some sense, we were colonists, only we never set sail on the waters, but merely ventured to the Eastern frontier.[26]

The image of Ukraine in Polish culture bears echoes of a colonial attitude towards inferior nations that was endemic to the time of the Polish *Kresy*. This image is distorted by resentments over our loss of these Eastern regions and a reassessment of our affiliation with Western culture that only becomes possible when we compare ourselves with Ukraine. This also might shed some light on the book's enigmatic subtitle, "A Secret History of the Slavs." *Mordor's Coming…* is the result of a deep examination of Polish-Ukrainian relations with the long history that forms the backdrop of *Tattoo…* Together with *Intermarium,* these books offer a rich object of analysis for postcolonial perspectives, especially those that focus on the problem of orientalism.[27]

The title of Szczerek's latest book, however, is somewhat deceiving. The title explicitly references Józef Pilsudski's idea for a federation of nations between the Baltic, Black and Adriatic Seas (under Polish leadership of course). The idea has recently been reclaimed by right wing public figures, and is widely cited in literature. More importantly, politicians gunning for Poland to become a world power have revived the idea of this geopolitical excavation. Of course, Szczerek is polemicizing these fantasies and relates to them ironically (as he does with the title *Triumphant Republic*), but Piłsudski's concept is by no means the book's central theme (the Intermarium itself does not even come up until page 68). The book's occupations lie closer to the themes taken up in Przemysław Czapliński's most recent book, titled *Displaced Map (Poruszona mapa),* in which the author builds a portrait of Polish culture in relation to the regions of Europe that have cultural relevance for the Poles. Czapliński bases this portrait on Poles' own visions of these regions (for the most part literary ones) and seeks to shed light on the formation of modern Polish identity.[28] Szczerek's book adopts an even larger scope: he is tracing the relations of the cultural peripheries — historical and contemporary — of the countries of East and Central Europe in relation to the longstanding Western-oriented center of civilization (which today takes the form of the European Union). At times, these relations consisted of attempting to consolidate powerful autonomous bodies (as in the case of the Intermarium project), or either disassociating from or clinging to the surrogate superpower that has always been Russia. In reality, Szczerek is concerned with relations between the center and the periphery (this becomes clear in the book's epigraph, which cites Tomasz Zarycki, a major scholar on the question of peripheries). He is also concerned with questions of national and regional identity, or identities that exceed national borders, such as the idea of a united Slavic people. In this context, the Intermarium naturally functions as an alias for Central Europe and the pursuit of an ideology that would link the nations in this part of the

[26] *Obnażanie kompleksów i mitów*, interview with S. Frąckiewicz and Z. Szczerek, http://lubimyczytac.pl/aktualnosci/3060/obnazanie-kompleksow-i-mitow/.

[27] The latest discussion in this vein took place in the pages of the bimonthly journal "Nowa Europa Wschodnia" 2017 issue 2, initiated with articles by A. Balcer and Z. Szczerek, and later on with contributions by P. Czapliński, W. Górecki, and L. Włodek.

[28] See P. Czapliński, *Poruszona mapa. Wyobraźnia geograficzno-kulturowa polskiej literatury przełomu XX i XXI wieku*, Krakow 2016.

continent, an area usually perceived by the world as an array of curiosities. These are Szczerek's preoccupations, for he has no agenda to revive the Intermarium. *Intermarium* is a final reckoning. Despite its mocking airs, this is a tragic book that diagnoses the rise of dangerous asocial tendencies in Central Europe. It is the story of disappointed peripheries and their rebellion against an over-idealized center:

> Poland has rebelled against the West, for the West has turned out to be something quite different from what it was supposed to be. Golden, dazzling neon marquis have been replaced by banal advertisements for Rossmann and Lidl. This was supposed to be the land of riches, but it turned out to be the land of the extreme left. We were supposed to get babes in fast cars from Playboy centerfolds, and instead we get the feminists' pep talks that the word "babe" demeans women, and we get scolded by the Greens that fast cars poison the atmosphere. Let alone the fact that Playboy discontinued their nudie pics. [I, p. 331].

Gonzo Reportage: Approaching Fiction

The rich tradition of countless historical journeys to the East lies alongside the legacy of the *Kresy* and martyrological Polish literature to form the interetextual foundation of these Ukrianian journeys. These eastward journeys include Mickiewicz's exoticizing *Crimean Sonnets* and varied accounts of traveling in pursuit of spiritual transformation, such as Herman Hesse's *Journey to the East*, the beatnik generation's Eastern-inspired attempts at psychological renewal, as well as the hippies' similar efforts in the counterculture broadly conceived. In the chapter titled *Beat,* the protagonist of *Mordor's Coming…* explicitly references the myth of the countercultural vagabond, conceived to a large degree by the beatnik generation (widely known in Poland since the early 1990s). The book also alludes to Jack Kerouac's book *On the Road*:

> And so we took off for this alleged East, and we kept going, going, going. On mini-busses, trains, busted up Ladas. This is how it went. Instead of Benzedrine we had the balsam Vigor. Instead of rural America and Mexico in the '50s… we had Ukraine. But it's all the same. We grabbed our backpacks and hit the road." [MC, p. 41].

Like his later book *Highway No. 7, Mordor's Coming…* is a road novel clearly inspired by Kerouac's book and the host of literary and film variations on the genre that followed it. For the most part, this journey is modeled after countercultural templates represents the pursuit of adventure and a taste of the exotic rather than spiritual transformation. This being said, by the end of the book, the narrator manages to achieve the latter as well. The hero-narrator Szczerek is not a contemplative wandering aesthete, but a vagabond or bum. He is off in search of adventures, wending through the post-socialist morass, compelled by places entirely missing from tourists' maps, places where "there is nothing at all," perhaps recalling Stasiuk's well-known Babadag.

The author smuggles a cue for how to read *Mordor's Coming* and its highly subjective and energetic narration into the chapter called *Gonzo*. This term seems useful here as a descriptor of

the protagonist's journalistic reports published on Polish online forums, but perhaps it also functions as a marker of the narration's formal identity as a whole. The genre of journalism referenced in the chapter title is somewhat obscure in Poland: this is a genre that scandalizes and personally engages the reporter. The protagonist articulates these very strategies in his own brief definition of *gonzo* reportage, which is supposed to be "filthy, strong, cruel. This is the gonzo essence. In gonzo there is booze, fags, drugs, chicks. And there are definitely vulgarities." [BC, p. 99]. We learn even more from the reports he excerpts, written in the gonzo style:

> I wrote a few gonzos in Odessa. Take, for instance, the one about the lady who rented out her apartment and murdered her guests with a leaky gas stove. The lady robbed them of all their possessions and then, working with an old geezer (for what kind of lady would she be if she didn't have a geezer in tow) she carried the bodies up to the roof of the housing block where no one ever went and just left them there. The bodies were only discovered when it got popular to play around on Google Earth.
> This is the kind of drivel I wrote, and well, people read it. [BC, pp. 106-7]

The progenitor of this variation of reportage (or perhaps reportage "style," as English-language sources define it) was the American journalist Hunter S. Thompson who, until recently, was mainly known in Poland from the film adaptation of his 1971 book *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. In 1998, Terry Gilliam directed a film by the same title, featuring Johnny Depp in the main role. In Poland, the film met with critical reviews, although it became a cult favorite among many cinephiles.[29] The Polish translation of Thompson's book — which is hailed as the touchstone classic of gonzo journalism — came out in 2008 with the literal title *Lęk i odraza w Las Vegas*. The publication was not followed up with any other translations from the genre. The reportage style only started getting attention in Poland when the Ha!art periodical put out a themed issue on the subject in 2013. The issue included the founding text for gonzo journalism: Thompson's *Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved* (1970), translated to Polish by Ziemowit Szczerek.[30] Generally speaking, we might describe Thompson's gonzo journalism as a countercultural project falling under the banner of New Journalism that embraced the right to generate fiction and the exposition of the reporter's first-person subjectivity, often yielding the portrait of a new and "unhinged" reporter who distorts reality freely. The reporter would carry out this operation through his spontaneous reactions, linguistic freedom and altered states of consciousness prompted by alcohol and narcotics. Most importantly, gonzo disassociated itself from the objectivity and referentiality traditionally required of reportage, although it was by no means the first aesthetic school to take up this cause. For now, we will bracket the question of whether gonzo journalism is just one auteur's variation on the broader tradition of New Journalism (associated with writers like Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote

[29]For unknown reasons, the film was screened in Poland under its French title: *Las Vegas Parano*. This adaptation was in fact a remake, for the first film adaptation of Thompson's book came out in 1980 as *Where the Buffalo Roam* with an outlandish performance by Bill Murray. The first adaptation is virtually unknown in Poland.

[30]See: H. S. Thompson, *Upadek i demoralizacja na Derby Kentucky*, trans. Z. Szczerek, "Ha!art" 2013, issue 1 [https://issuu.com/korporacja_haart/docs/ha_41_calosc/1?ff=true&e=3640121/10661728]

and Norman Mailer) that seeks to subjectivize reportage and enhance its literary qualities.[31] Wolfe, Capote and Mailer, on the other hand, have long been known and adored in Poland (as authors of reportage no less). Thompson and his gonzo style, on the other hand, were a discovery of recent years. This publication history surely had a direct influence on Szczerek's work. Thompson's texts often spout fantasies about unrealized or botched journalism assignments. In a similar vein, Szczerek's protagonist sends his editors sensational reports from Ukraine in the gonzo style. In keeping with Thompson's work, the heroes of Szczerek's book do not limit themselves to the drunken inebriation so canonical for eastward-traveling Poles; they also help themselves to LSD, colloquially referred to as acid (see: the chapter titled *Acid*). Experimentation with LSD often comes hand in hand with explicit references to the American literary inspiration for these benders (or rather, its film adaptation, since they refer to it by its Polish-rendered title, *Las Vegas Parano*: "Almost hardcore is hardcore; almost *Fear and Loathing* is *Fear and Loathing,* no? […] The Vigor balsam calmed my nerves enough that I was able to gulp down some acid. Indeed. Almost *parano* is *parano*." [MC, pp. 74-75][32]

Szczerek's protagonist quotes from his own gonzo journalism with the caveat that he writes this way for popularity and profit. He has no illusions about his readers' lowly tastes and knows he must appease them, ideally by rendering all cultural stereotypes in vivid hyperbole. The book's main narrative thread, however, also crafted in the gonzo style, identifies with the protagonist's actions in ironic scare quotes, while the epigraph cited earlier and the novel's conclusion suggest a more serious tone. The chapter titled *Gonzo* provides the book with a reflexive identity marker for its poetics (with exaggeration as a governing principle). At the same time, the author points out the mercantile motives behind this writing style (which was originally conceived as an anti-establishment rebellion in its American context). For Szczerek, to write gonzo is to adapt one's style to the demands of a new medium and the nuances of online journalism that caters to clicks:

> So that's how I started to professionally specialize in the art of deception. Fibs. Speaking as an expert, I might call this the art of preserving national stereotypes. As a rule, nasty ones.
> But it pays. Because nothing sells better in Poland than Schadenfreude. I know it all too well. All I had to do was write a few texts about Ukraine in a gonzo tone and the commissions started coming in. I must have dazzled them with my Ukrainian drivel and dissimulation. It had to be filthy, strong, cruel. This is the gonzo essence. In gonzo there is booze, fags, drugs, chicks. And there are definitely vulgarities. So that's how I wrote, and it all went swimmingly. I got a great gig as staff writer for one of those up-and-coming websites out of Krakow. Every week I had to send in a fat wedge of Ukrainian meat. They wanted hardcore, so hardcore's what they got. […] Well, at any rate, they paid. They funded more trips to Ukraine. So I stuck with my deceptive articles and I invented

[31]See: Z. Bauer, *Dziennikarstwo "gonzo": epizod czy trwały trend w dziennikarstwie?*, [in:] *Dziennikarstwo a literatura w XX i XXI wieku*, ed. K. Wolny-Zmorzyński, W. Furman, J. Snopek, Warsaw 2011; B. Stopel, *Gonzo bez lęku i odrazy*, "Ha!art" 2013, issue 1;. I. Adamczewska, *Wariacje na temat pewnego paktu. O dziennikarstwie "gonzo,"* "Czytanie Literatury. Łódzkie Studia Literaturoznawcze" 2014, issue 3, and *Gonzo journalism*, "Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich" 2014, vol. 1.

[32]This passage is mostly devoted to describing a narcotic-fueled experience of reality, but it ends with a clash between Poles and a Ukrainian who has come along for the journey. Szczerek plays with the Polish word for acid (*kwas*) and its other colloquial meaning as a conflict, disagreement or fight. The dispute ultimately brings about the protagonist's spiritual transformation.

> such hardcore tales you'd have to be a fool to fall for them. I turned Ukraine into a crackhouse on wheels, baked à la Kusturica, where anything can happen and everything does happen. The wild, wild east. Poles loved it. They kept clicking and reading. And the more they clicked, the faster the cash flowed from the giddy advertisers. In Poland, selling negative stereotypes about our neighbors brought in loads of cash. [MC, pp. 99-100].

This, of course, is a satire of online journalism, but it also communicates a self-ironizing signal to the reader, nodding to the poetics of grotesque exaggeration that inform the book's overarching tone. Gonzo functions here as a form of buffoonery (albeit mercantile). But derisive hyperbole can also be mobilized as a narrative tactic of cultural disillusionment:

> I even started to love this morass. In Poland I hated it. Here, I had no choice. I always suspected that traveling to the post-soviet East was a journey into the very depths of what we despise within our own country. And in fact, that is the main reason Poles even come here. It's a journey into Schadenfreude, a journey you embark on only so you have something to go home to. Because here, it's essentially the same as it is back home, just intensified. It's a wasteland of everything we tried to eject from ourselves. I always suspected this, although only a gonzo journalist could really write it. Any other way and it would come out crooked.

The protagonist's choice to stylize the narrative as gonzo journalism allows him to articulate the author's own postcolonial position. The Polish fascination with Ukraine manifests itself as the rejection of Poland's own "eastness" while Poland is absorbed into Europe and the Occident. In reality, we are no less "eastern," we merely imitate the West more extremely, and by traveling eastward, we veil our cultural complexes.

In Szczerek's book, gonzo poetics are only strictly affiliated with the protagonist's paraphrased works of "reportage." On the other hand, criticism on *Mordor's Coming…* tends to identify the style of the hero's hyperbolic stories with the overarching authorial narrative.[33] Moreover, in an interview I cite below, the author himself claims that the book was written as "gonzo journalism about gonzo journalism," which speaks to Szczerek's fascination with this mode (remember: he is also Thompson's translator). And if we seek out other representatives of the gonzo school in Polish reportage (Adamczewska also situates Jacek Hugo-Bader's writing in this category) then certainly Szczerek, with his vivid authorial voice developed in *Mordor's Coming…* and refined in his subsequent books, can be included in this aesthetic category (although formally, *Mordor's Coming…* is the only book to reflexively thematize gonzo).[34] Szczerek's nonchalant literary diction, which already had readers spellbound when his first book came out, is a hybrid of erudition and popular slang written in a humorous and at times ironic shorthand. He masterfully manipulates stereotypes using satirical condescension, generic (tragi)comic scenarios, and a fluid narration that avails itself of colloquial speech and occasionally even veers cavalier. To the gonzo formula more broadly among Polish writers, we would have to proceed with caution. It would be too easy to project seemingly gonzo at-

[33]See: I. Adamczewska, op. cit., p. 196; J. Szydłowska, op. cit., pp. 384-387.

[34]Mariusz Szczygieł also follows Adamczewska's lead in his article that closely examines American gonzo. He identifies Szczerek and Hugo-Bader as local representatives of the style. See: Szczygieł, *Gonzo,* "Książki. Magazyn do czytania" 2017, issue 3.

tributes onto Polish reportage. Yet the reflexive stylization we find in Szczerek's work (and most likely in Hugo-Bader's as well) is an entirely different case. It means something else to unconsciously meet these requisites without ever knowing they belong to a genre, model, writing technique, style, or simply Thompson's personal idiom.[35]

Lie-Reportage

The direct allusion made in Szczerek's first book to gonzo journalism poses a question about the status of literary reportage as the literature of fact: non-fiction. The blurbs o the back cover of *Mordor's Coming*... seem to suggest this is a work of bona fide reportage: "A bracing, shocking reportage" (Andrij Bondar), "*Mordor's Coming*... proves that the genre of reportage has not yet been exhausted and is crossing into a fresh new stage," (Sławomir Shuty). The brief "About the Author" note characterizes Szczerek as a journalist first and foremost. Reviewers also regularly tie *Mordor's Coming*... (and Szczerek's other books) to the reportage genre, and some even suggest that Szczerek practiced gonzo journalism in his earlier work for the press. In this case, the descriptor "gonzo" seems to apply to both protagonist and author.[36] On the other hand, the author himself cautions us against such a straightforward reading:

> [...] what fascinated me in non-fiction is its subjective element, its way of pushing reality through the filter of the self. And if we're honest, the whole book is made up of perspectives — of many perspectives. I really had fun with this, with creating a specific construction from a very different set of views. Views on Poland, Ukraine, the East, all things Slavic... *Mordor's Coming to Eat Us* was not written as an example of gonzo journalism, it was written as gonzo journalism about gonzo journalism. The hero-journalist classifies his own work as gonzo, choosing this convention. It's not my fault that people read *Mordor's Coming* as a work of non-fiction.[37]

On the very first page of these tails of Ukrainian travels, we encounter a distinct sign of fictionality (distancing the book from the author's identity): the hero-narrator is Łukasz Pończyński, an online journalist. In a certain sense, Łukasz figures as the author's alter ego, for Szczerek himself often journeyed into Ukraine and contributed to informational online hubs (although never in the hero's sensational and inventive style, for his political analyses had an entirely serious tenor!). As the book goes on, the travel accounts continuously diverge from the facts. For instance, the first trip he describes allegedly took place in 2002, while the circumstances seem to apply to an entirely different moment. In the passage, he describes a colossal monument to Stepan Bandera standing in Lviv that was actually not erected until 2007.

[35]One author who appears in the gonzo issue associates this "model" with the work of Sławomir Shuty and the lesser known Jan Sobczak, Piotr Milewski, Kornel Maliszewski and Kazimierz Malinowski. This creates the impression of promoting a particular scene. The author of strictly-defined travel books are most akin to gonzo must be Wojciech Cejrowski – see: J. Bińczycki, *Sporysz zamiast pejotlu*, "Ha!art" 2013, issue 1. See also: K. Frukacz, *Amerykańskie Nowe Dziennikarstwo po polsku? Transfer poetyk, problemy adaptacyjne*, [in:] *Adaptacje II. Transfery kulturowe*, ed. W. Hajduk-Gawron, Katowice 2015.

[36]For example, this idea comes from a reviewer who wrote about Szczerek's "confession of past sins"– see: M. Szymański, *Bloki przypiekane słońcem*, dwutygodnik.com, http://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/4427-bloki-przypiekane-sloncem.html?print=1?print=1.

[37]*Obnażanie kompleksów*..., op. cit., http://lubimyczytac.pl/aktualnosci/3060/obnazanie-kompleksow-i-mitow.

The border between the hero-narrator and the author is never sharply defined, but we can still trace its contours. One critic who analyzes Szczerek's first book as a work of gonzo journalism astutely evokes Ryszard Nycz's notion of the sylleptic subject: the construction of a textual "I" — often narrated in the first person — so prevalent in contemporary literature (we also see this in the work of Dorota Masłowska and Michał Witkowski), and even historical literature (Bruno Schulz, Witold Gombrowicz). I would argue that this concept is more relevant for Szczerek's *Tattoo…..38* This device is associated with literature that blurs the facts, taking in the naïve reader (take, for instance, the passage describing the students on a pilgrimage to Drohobycz to "find the Street of Crocodiles," which is the effect of Schulz's own construction of a hero-narrator). This feature does not describe non-fiction. To even apply this device to gonzo prose, or more generally speaking, to reportage, is an indicator of the writing's literary (fictional) status.

> That's why I created this hero. To push him into the kind of devilry I myself could never in indulge in. Gonzo, his literary genre, is premised on pure invention. And in fact, all literature that falls under the English heading of fiction is exactly this: invention. Gonzo is a form of fiction, even if it is modeled after non-fiction. Theoretically speaking, gonzo has no responsibility to stick strictly to the facts in order to describe certain mechanisms. But Łukasz, my hero, uses the gonzo formula to embellish the stereotypes that Polish readers hunger for.[39]

Szczerek's book plays with the convention of reportage, and he styles his work as gonzo reportage to mark this. We must take this gesture in scare quotes, or at least bear in mind the tenuous entanglement between hero and author. I would argue that Szczerek's other works of "reportage" might be described as examples of "lie-reportage."[40] This phrase alludes to Konwicki's formula of his "lie-diaries." As in its original context, the phrase marks texts as literature. The term "lie-diaries" first appeared in Konwicki's *The Calendar and the Hourglass* (1976) and might also be used to characterize his later "diaries." These works are invented literary constructions (albeit in the "home chronicle" style) and reflexive responses that surely take their cue from Gombrowicz. Writing in the "lie-diary" mode, Konwicki fictionalizes the subject (as a syllpetic "I") and even fabricates his travels and the adventures they entail, even taking his hero to Mongolia! Szczerek evokes Gombrowicz in a similar vein, and his work might be situated alongside Konwicki's as literary creations. This supports our decision to classify Szczerek's work on the side of literature. The author himself even makes this suggestion by distinguishing non-fiction from the literary *Mordor's Coming…*:

> I have always been compelled by playing with reality, myths, a stereotypical vision of the world, the distortion of reality through personal perception and through the media's eye — that's why

[38]See: I. Adamczewska, op. cit., pp. 194-195. "*Ja* sylleptyczne – mówiąc najprościej – to *ja*, które musi być rozumiane na dwa odmienne sposoby **równocześnie**: a mianowicie, jako prawdziwe i jako zmyślone, jako empiryczne i jako tekstowe, jako autentyczne i jako fikcyjno-powieściowe" – R. Nycz, *Tropy "ja". Koncepcje podmiotowości w literaturze polskiej ostatniego stulecia*, "Teksty Drugie" 1994, issue 2, p. 22.

[39]Z. Szczerek, *Synowie buraczanych pól* op. cit., http://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kultura/paszporty/1569197,2,rozmowa-z-ziemowitem-szczerkiem.read.

[40]This classification is also proposed by critics who have analyzed *Mordor's Coming…*in terms of its relationship with classical journalism and its gonzo variation. Yet both critics are referencing the hyperbolic style of the protagonist's "gonzos" paraphrased in the text. See: J. Szydłowska, op. cit., p. 386 ; I. Adamczewska, op. cit., p. 187.

> the book came out this way. This mechanism of bending the truth has also always compelled me precisely because who am I but a little bugger leeching off reality, for I work in the current events column of a major news forum. But when I write these articles, I write them straight, without distortion. That's why my distortions landed me with a book: which is to say, with literature.[41]

Yet the author seems most comfortable in the context of these fiction-generating geopoetics, rather than classic, authentic travel reportage. This mode even shapes the book's anecdotes that seem strictly historical. The same formula plays out in *Tattoo*… in its description of historical travels along Poland's postwar eastern border (the so-called Curzon Line). The attentive reader will notice direct references to Gombrowicz's novel *Transatlantyk,* including an explicit nod to the Society of the Chevaliers of the Spur!). Szczerek is in fact reproducing Gombrowicz's portrait of the political climate surrounding Polish emigration. In his portrait of the Zalishchyky summer resort in what was the southernmost "Mediterranean" resort town in prewar Poland, we get a taste of the twilight of the Polish *Kresy*, tinged with the nostalgic but somehow preapocalyptic atmosphere of Konwicki's *Chronicle of Amorous Accidents* (and Wajda's film adaptation) or even Nikita Mikhalkov's film "Burnt by the Sun." Szczerek liberally helps himself to cultural legends of the period as his source material, so his account is hardly a strictly historical and political discourse, but instead gives an overview of cultural images and stereotypes for narrating the history of Eastern Poland. Szczerek continues to elaborate on the issue of national images and illusions in *Intermarium,* which offers a catalog of invented regions alongside entirely real ones.

Imagined Geography

One more essential feature of Szczerek's book that links it to literary fiction bears mention. The author often refers to creating cultural maps and reproduces this practice himself. I would argue that Szczerek's books can be examined in the context of territories conceived through fiction, or imagined geography. This concept (also articulated as creative or imaginative geography) draws from the work of the "godfather" of postcolonialism, Edward W. Said (imaginative geography). It refers to culturally and politically determined geographic figures that exert a specific influence on colonial practices and self-colonizing practices alike.[42] In Szczerek's books that treat Ukrainian themes, Western Ukraine seems to feed off the nostalgic and idyllic myth of Galicia, while Eastern Ukraine figures as the titular Mordor. On top of the reality of the East, Szczerek superimposes the mythical evil region, borrowed, of course, from Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. This name, so fantastic in origin, is even introduced by the Ukrainian character, Taras, who accompanies the hero into Eastern Ukraine: "Here, everything starts to blur together, he said. Here it's all the same. Whether it's Ukraine, Russia, whatever. Even Mordor." [MC, p. 165]. This moniker has also appeared in the political press in reference to Putin's Russia, particularly in the context of the war in Ukraine. Interestingly enough, in August of 2015, Ukrainian President Poroshenko called "New Russia" precisely this, referring to the rebel regions in Dnipropetrovsk and Luhansk, and in January of 2016, the Ukrainian version

[41] *Obnażanie kompleksów*…, op. cit., http://lubimyczytac.pl/aktualnosci/3060/obnazanie-kompleksow-i-mitow/2.

[42] A broader discussion of this issue can be found in Elżbieta Rybicka's theoretical project on geopoetics: *Geopoetyka. Przestrzeń i miejsce we współczesnych teoriach i praktykach literackich*, Krakow 2014.

of Google Translate offered "Mordor" as a translation for "Russia." By availing himself of this term, Szczerek was perhaps capturing the spirit of the time. The narrator of *Tattoo*... strives to distance himself from this Ukrainian self-stereotype when the phrase comes up during his visit to the hometown of the overthrown President Yanukovych: "an anti-Maidan stronghold:"

> These were horrid thoughts, thoughts that would turn these people into orcs out of Mordor. This was only useful as fuel for antipathy for these people, and the whole of pro-Maidan Ukraine seemed to feed off these antipathies. These are zombies, they told me in Kiev and Lviv. These are bad, ugly people who are products of a bad, ugly world. Don't even try to understand them, they told me. They're orcs. So many things pissed me off in Maidan-era Ukraine, but this? This pissed me off the most. [TT, p. 189]

Of course, in the title of Szczerek's debut book, the name "Mordor" carries a range of meanings, embracing "easternness" at large and therefore threatening the Poles' secure sense of "westernness." The name also functions on a broader scale, figuring generally as the East for the West:

> Mordor is not like Tolkien's Middle Earth, where elves are perhaps something like the French, the hobbits resemble the English, and the dwarves are perhaps some version of Germans. Mordor is that vague, gray and inhospitable space looming to the east, where monstrous orcs with kohlrabi mugs do dwell. For this is exactly how the West has always perceived Eastern Europe, and continues to do so today.[43]

Perhaps in the vein of Andrzej Stasiuk, Szczerek conjures a geopoetics replete with so many cultural visions of the East in order to put pressure on the timeless and rudimentary division of Europe into two halves, a division whose roots reach past Yalta and the Iron Curtain. In the eighteenth century, the historical division of Europe into North and South gradually gave way to an opposition between East and West. At the same time, an intermediate zone appeared: Eastern Europe figured as a construct somewhat less exotic than the Orient that allowed one to define what it means to be "Western." In his book on the concept of Eastern Europe and its origins in the French Enlightenment, Larry Wolff reconstructs the process by which this "invention" of Enlightenment thought came to be, positing an undeveloped space dependent on colonial impetus from the West.[44] This space would be a European province less remote and barbaric than the Orient, culturally and spatially defined as a societally immature and a poorly developed cultural periphery: the antithesis of Europe.

Constructions in this vein have tainted the West's perception of our region until the end of the twentieth century, if not to this day. This paradigm has also influenced the formation of entrenched phantasmagorical visions of the region in popular culture. Invented regions with odd names are not unique to fantasy literature (i.e. Mordor): this paradigm plays out in popular culture that posits an unreal and faraway Eastern Europe from a Western perspective. Ziemowit Szczerek's blog is enigmatically titled *Between Rurytania and Molvania* (*Między*

[43]Z. Szczerek, *Synowie buraczanych pól*, op. cit., http://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kultura/paszporty/1569197,1,rozmowa-z-ziemowitem-szczerkiem.read.

[44]See L. Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, Stanford 1994.

Rurytanią a Molwanią), although if anything, this speaks to the author's penchant for invented names. In the last sketch of *Intermarium* (which had already been published as a piece of journalism), Szczerek lists the many visions of an essential Eastern Europe that circulate in the mass culture of the West. He cites regions such as Rurytania, Borduria, Syldavia, Elbonia, Molwania, Slaka and Krakozja, places that are all condensations of ubiquitous stereotypes. They tend to represent a vision of Eastern Europe as a space that is simultaneously totalitarian, authoritarian, backwards and primitive. These visions have been concocted in the West in order to domesticate the continent's strange and sometimes threatening eastern peripheries. At this point, I will cite a longer fragment of the text because it plays a decisive role in defining the book's tone as a whole:

> I've been all over Central Europe. From the Adriatic to the Black Sea, from the Balkans to the Baltics. I've passed through all those places: Borduria, Rurytania, Molwania, Elbonia, Krakozja. All those nonexistent invented nations that stand for our part of Europe in Western popular culture. The reflection of a stereotype. It all started with Rurytania. At the turn of the century, a British man named Anthony Hope made it up. He needed an appropriate setting for his romance novels. It's a bit exotic, but then again, a bit not. The general idea is that you start in the "real world" (the West) and from there set off for a strange region not yet civilized, still bogged down in feudalism, where you live through strange adventures, all the while going between a German-speaking aristocracy and a simple, scuffed-up folk that resemble, as one of Hopes epigones once wrote, "dirty Slavs and Huns."
>
> And this is precisely how the fin-de-siècle West, gazing out over the Austro-Hungarian Empire, imagined Central Europe. Later on, between the World Wars, the peaceful and rural Rurytania, threatened constantly by their stronger neighbors (or perhaps by dynasties or revolutions), gave way to other imaginary visions: Borduria and Syldavia. These countries come from Belgian artist Hergé and his Tintin comics. Borduria and Syldavia together embraced all the prewar stereotypes available on the subject of Europe's eastern lands. The comic features Cyrillic writing alongside minarets, medieval monarchs (Syldavia), authoritarianism enforced by uniformed thugs, and even nationalist monuments of moustachioed tyrants (Borduria). [...] In a kind of Disney Land we find, for instance, Brutopia, where everything is filthy, tyrannical, evil and cold. In *Naked Lunch*, we find Annexia. From Ursula Le Guin, we get Orsinia. The British novelist Malcolm Bradbury created Slaka, the muddy, tawdry nation somewhere off in Central Europe, replete with socialist absurdists, money launderers, opportunists and cowards all kissing up to the Western tourist one moment and government informers the next. And when communism collapsed, popular culture in the West responded immediately by spawning Elbonia in Scott Adams' Dilbert comics (yes, the very same ones that appeared in "Gazeta Praca"). Dilbert, as a corporate-rat-capitalist sales specialist, flies to this "Elbonia" to "teach the ways of capitalism." Or perhaps "flies" is not quite the right word, for the Elbonian Airline offers something more like a catapult that shoots its passengers into the sky. The whole nation is wallowing in mud, and its people wear fur caps and full-coverage beards (women and children notwithstanding). Molvania, meanwhile, is the Eastern European country described in a fictional series of guidebook parodies: here (perhaps it comes as no surprise) it is dirty, authoritarian and intolerant. Everyone has busted teeth and they all stink of garlic vodka. Later on, Steven Spielberg brought us Krakozhia, which is presumably some former Soviet Republic shaken every moment by military upheavals. This, more or less, is how the West sees our region, and Sasha Baron Cohen prolonged this tradition just a bit further with Borat [I, pp. 337-339].

Szczerek ironically keeps up this legacy, using his "Ukrainian" books to concoct even more monikers for communist and post-communist space such as Sovietia and Postsovietia (at some point, Szczerek titles an article on Belarus *Blackhole-Rus,* or in Polish, *Czarnadziuroruś*), and in *Intermarium,* he calls the formerly German regions *Exgermania* (*Poniemiecja*). At least some of these strange place names can be attributed to the author (Sovietia, Postsovetia, Exgermania, Karpatia*),* but Szczerek is also referencing xenonyms: cultural epithets for eastern territories coined in the West and cited in the excerpt above. In *Tattoo with a Trident,* Szczerek also evokes the local Ukrainian epithet Pachanat [TT, pp. 120-121].

Unlike Stasiuk, Szczerek's literary mode thrives off this hybrid of nostalgia and subjective imagination. He is wary towards his own, personal nostalgia, but explores imagined worlds that are social constructs: national self-images and images of foreign neihbors, nationalist mythologies, messianic ideologies of the Slavic essence, the eastern essence, the western essence, ethnogenic fantasies that verge into vivid fabrications, historical blind spots and pathological national narcissisms. These phantasmagorias seem all too amusing in *Intermarium*. Take, for instance, the fantasy of the Lechite Empire originally referencing Kadłubek, but now evolving freely into something entirely new, or perhaps the equally ancient mania of the Macedonians, who have reimagined their capital city Skopje as a Disneyland of pseudo-antiquity. The book also includes a few less jolly cases, such as the fascist salutes of the Right Wing party in Slovakia and the Ukrainian neo-Nazi organization Azov.

Intermarium is a comic and chilling reportage-guidebook for the phantasmagoric Intermarium region. At times it deals with political projects like Mitteleuropa, the Intermarium and Baltoscandia, but the most compelling aspect of Szczerek's book is its expansion of this imaginative geography into futurist visions that veer folkloric yet capture real contemporary politics, real feelings of national pride, and real stereotypes used to describe the self and one's neighbors. *Intermarium* also paints the portrait of a created geography that offers alternative histories for these nations and peoples.

Szczerek not only evokes Western European epithets for eastern regions at the service of a postcolonial critique: in fact, he seems invested in these inventions. Szczerek seems particularly smitten with Rurytania and its idyllic vision of a primitive eastern Valhalla. He also seems to fancy the authoritarian and totalitarian Borduria. Perhaps it is precisely between these two extremes that the novel unfolds, narrating the author's travels throughout the imagined geography of East and Central Europe under the banner of the Intermarium it shall never be:

> So I go around these Rurytanias that alternate with Bordurias. I travel around the Intermarium, dreamed up by so many, but never possible. Never possible precisely because they made Bordurias in its place, and Bordurias, with all their nationalist resentments, are incapable of ever reaching a place of understanding and united, can do nothing at all. (I, p. 341)

Intermarium is effectively a guidebook for the pseudo-community of Central Europe, for it turns out that in fact the only concept gluing together the mosaic of nations that makes up the Intermarium is this isolating national idea:

> Central Europe, that hapless Intermarium, is a place where the ethnic idea has truly degenerated and become a caricature of itself. Every place is the center of the world. Every nation, even if it can only claim a population of one or two million, must draw up, tighten up, and touch up its own history. (I, p. 139)

Intermarium is therefore the tale of Poland's neighbors near and far and their identity crises. In fact, each one of these neighbors imagines itself as a strong ethnic nation and world power: Great Serbia, Great Macedonia, Great Albania, Great Hungary, and so on, and so forth. This idea is conveyed through the labyrinth of fabricated borders that makes up the map on the book's inside cover. If we look closely at Great (not to mention entirely ordinary) Poland, some aspects of the map seem amusing. Take, for instance, the giant scale of the Masovian Voivodeship, or the Lesser Poland Voivodeship, or perhaps both together. Szczerek represents these national preconceptions in a spirit that seems to conform to the old aphoristic definition of the nation attributed to the French Historian Ernest Renan. According to this definition, a nation is "a group of people united by a mistaken view about the past and a hatred of their neighbors." Just as the historical notion of the Intermarium really only appeals to the Poles, this ethnomosaic dreamt up by Szczerek is ultimately a tale of Poland alone: a Poland viewed within the broader context of fantastical dreams of a true and absolute national form.

In the context of imagined geography, Szczerek's books become legible and reliable as explorations of cultural maps rather than mimetic travel reports. At the end of the day, Szczerek is writing about the cultural imagination of space and national phantasms. If we adopt the perspective of traditional writing on authenticity in reportage, we might say that Szczerek deals with fictions. These fictions, however, are cultural compositions (both ideological and political) that enact critical displacements of reality (the real). The books of Szczerek's oeuvre I analyze here, although they vary among themselves, might be grouped under the category of literary reportage (broadly conceived) in that they fully exploit literary modalities, including the mode so often exorcized from reportage — fiction.

KEYWORDS

Literariness

GONZO REPORTAGE

Polish contemporary literature

Abstract:
This article discusses the writing of Ziemowit Szczerek in the context of its genre credentials as travel reportage. Because Szczerek's work can be read as literary reportage, this article addresses the controversy over the genre's referentiality and literary status. It also discusses gonzo journalism, which was a source of inspiration for Szczerek, as well as creative devices that problematize issues of fictionality in reportage in reference to themes of imagined geography (E. W. Said), cultural self-stereotypes and hetero-stereotypes, and intertextual relations. The argument leads to the claim that Szczerek's literary reportage is deeply embedded in creative fiction, perhaps in the vein of Andrzej Stasiuk's work, and that this only enhances the value of his work.

travel reportage

Ziemowit Szczerek

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