

# Travel Styles: Ziemowit Szczerek's *Mordor is Coming to Eat Us*

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To begin, I will introduce three contexts.

The first context: A course in the Adam Mickiewicz University's Faculty of Polish Studies. Due to the small number of students, the group meets in the instructor's office. The cramped quarters might put some ill at ease, but for the most part, they foster the atmosphere of a close circle devoted to a common goal. This sentiment has some relevance for a question posed by the instructor regarding the source of adventure. Guiding the students to a specific response, the instructor asks one of them to open the door, and after a moment, repeats the request. The doors are opened. Where does adventure come from? Why, it comes from outside...

The second context: Jean-Paul Sartre's "Venice from my Window"<sup>1</sup> and Marielle Macé's commentary on the text in *A Literary Style: Looking Out on Life from a Balcony*.<sup>2</sup> At the beginning of the text, we see the French philosopher sitting by the window of a Venetian hotel. Sartre

<sup>1</sup> J.-P. Sartre, "Venice From My Window", trans. C. Turner, in *Portraits*, Chicago 2017 (1964).

<sup>2</sup> Michelle Macé, *A Literary Style: Looking Out on Life from a Balcony*, [https://villagillet.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/mace\\_marielle\\_en.pdf](https://villagillet.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/mace_marielle_en.pdf) (December 29 2017)

gazes out onto the lagoon and describes not so much the space spread out before him as its highly specific configuration: the lack of geographic coordinates due to the fact that his view is cut off by the window frame irks the philosopher. What can we make of this perceptive moment? The philosopher sees a Venice deprived of a horizon, for he is “condemned to short-sightedness” (“which prevents him from projecting, and for him, all action begins with projection.”)<sup>3</sup> After all, the place from which he looks down on the city is merely one part of the image circumscribed by a frame that restricts the visual field.<sup>4</sup>

The third context: *Ghosts of Home. The Afterlife of Czernowitz in Jewish Memory*<sup>5</sup>, or, Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer’s journey to Chernivtsi (formerly Czernowitz), the birthplace of Hirsch’s parents. Hirsch is also the author of *Family Frames. Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, a book in which she (according to Aleksandra Ubertowska) forges a pathway between concept and experience, and between intellectual and affective attempts to reckon with intergenerational memory and the traumatic past.<sup>6</sup> The book’s first and most revealing section, “We would not have come without you,” tells the story of a family trip organized in 1998. The authors were accompanied by Hirsch’s parents, who had emigrated from Czernowitz in the mid-1940s. This “roots trip” (Hirsch’s phrase) is an attempt to re-encounter places tied to the Hirsches’ past within the space of this multicultural city.<sup>7</sup> The authors are not concerned with the city’s historical fate, but rather, with “Czernowitz in the Bukowina, now twice lost to Jews, came to persist only as a projection—as an idea physically disconnected from its geographical location and tenuously dependent on the vicissitudes of personal, familial, and cultural memory.”<sup>8</sup>

These contexts introduce three perspectives: the first being a new experience precipitated by a shift in spatial coordinates, the second being a new form of space conditioned by its point of observation, and the third being the forging of theoretical concepts based on the somatic experience of coming into contact with space and its layers of accumulated meanings. All three perspectives will support our approach to Ziemowit Szczerek’s work of reportage, *Mordor’s Coming to Eat Us: A Secret History of the Slavs*,<sup>9</sup> and its narratives of travel through Ukraine.

The publisher of *Mordor’s Coming...* promotes the book as the tale of Polish “backpackers” journeying to the East in search of adventure and the “hardcore.” The destination of the tourists’ explorations is Ukraine, and they travel the region by every possible means of transportation, using trains, buses and their beloved “*marshrutka*” mini-buses. It hardly matters what vehicle they end up in so long as it’s old and broken-down. As they go along, the wanderers pick up stories they will share with others back in Poland, but only after

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 2

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> M. Hirsch, L. Spitzer, *Ghosts of Home. The Afterlife of Czernowitz in Jewish Memory*, Berkley 2010.

<sup>6</sup> See: A. Ubertowska, *Praktykowanie postpamięci. Marianne Hirsch i fotograficzne widma z Czernowitza*, “Teksty Drugie,” 2013 issue 4, p. 269.

<sup>7</sup> M. Hirsch, L. Spitzer, op. cit., p. xvii.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. xv

<sup>9</sup> Z. Szczerek, *Przyjście Mordor i nas zje, czyli tajna historia Słowian*, Krakow 2013.

touching them up to make them more exotic.<sup>10</sup> For their own travel is propelled by similar, fanciful tales. Ukraine strikes them as a phenomenon, a phantasmagoria, or an illusion stitched together from memories and sensory impressions that do not necessarily conform to reality. “There are days like these – “ (here, Sartre comes to our aid) “...when Venice seems sated on its own memories, and the hapless tourist wanders lost in this fantastical panopticum where water becomes the basic material of delusion.”<sup>11</sup> For Szczerek’s tourists, Ukraine is no Venice: it is an illusion forged from fantasy and imagination that becomes its own self-perpetuating simulacrum. Reality is replaced with a configuration of its signs. In the foreground, the doppelganger and generator of signs eludes us, leaving reality no chance to constitute itself.<sup>12</sup> In its place, self-reinforcing signs step up to generate narrative. This mechanism becomes quite clear in the scene describing the protagonists’ arrival in Lviv:

And then there was Lviv.

This city isn’t supposed to exist – this is what I thought to myself, gazing out the window. The Polish myth of the loss of this place is so overpowering that the city itself simply isn’t supposed to exist. Yet here it stood, looking no worse for the wear. In fact, it even had the gall to resemble the city it was before its local apocalypse...<sup>13</sup>

Tourists visiting Ukraine define their mode of travel through this juxtaposition of reality and fantasy. They can choose between two strategies: the myth of the “wild East” and “Post-Soviet jungle”<sup>14</sup> enhanced with the belief in a “lost Poland,” or a parody of this first mode of travel, blending constant astonishment with a strong penchant for the exotic:

“Oh yeah!” boomed Udaj and Kusaj as they launched into taking photographs. They photographed the bear, the deer and the lady working the bar, even after she screamed at them to stop. But Udaj and Kusaj got her somehow. They just shouted “oh yeah!” and went on taking pictures.<sup>15</sup>

This is the response of those Polish tourists who choose the first path. They screech with delight in a local pub converted into a sushi bar but retaining its artificial aesthetic. The waitress, for example, looks like she belongs in a communist-era milk bar and wears a skin-tight kimono. The Polish tourist’s gaze distorts Post-Soviet space.

Dariusz Nowacki posits that we can trace this phenomenon back to the particular genre of reportage Szczerek mobilizes, a genre whose brutality and rawness is meant to convey a “gon-

<sup>10</sup>See: < <http://www.ha.art.pl/wydawnictwo/nowe-ksiazki/2852-przyjdzie-mordor-i-nas-zje-czyli-tajna-historia-slowian.html> > (December 31 2017).

<sup>11</sup>J.-P. Sartre, op. cit., p. 72.

<sup>12</sup>See: J. Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra,” trans. Paul Foss and Paul Patton, in *Simulacra and Simulations*, ed. Mark Poster, Stanford, 1988, pp. 166 - 184

<sup>13</sup>Z. Szczerek, op. cit., p. 10.

<sup>14</sup>See D. Nowacki, *Przyjdzie Mordor i nas zje, czyli tajna historia Słowian*, <http://www.institutksiazki.pl/ksiazki-detal,literatura-polska,9719,przyjdzie-mordor-i-nas-zje--czyli-tajna-historia-slowian.html> (December 25 2017).

<sup>15</sup>Z. Szczerek, op. cit., p. 93.

zo" style.<sup>16</sup> The mystification produced by these strategic distortions renders transparent the national stereotypes and feelings of superiority held by Pole journeying eastward: "Here we could get a thrill from the local hardcore, just like we poor drunks so proud of our crippled country rejoiced when we managed to find something even more crippled than ourselves."<sup>17</sup> While Nowacki is mainly concerned with how the mangled portrait of Ukrainians ultimately becomes a genuine and cruel portrait of Poles and their complexes and pettiness, this distortion seeps beyond this specific dynamic. For Szczerek, the fundamental features of this distortion are the mediation of how we perceive those unlike ourselves and the act of observing the observer – for this is what propels the pursuit of Ukraine, not only for Poles, but for Germans, Americans and Canadians as well, who all turn this gaze on Ukraine, Poland, and the interactions between them.

By ascribing the same inversions to different characters, Szczerek creates a network of contingencies based on a hierarchical order of reality. Identical phrases are expressed in disparate contexts, discrediting the authors behind these beliefs. The collision of gazes between a Pole and a Canadian turns out to be an intense episode of shortsightedness, the lazy passing of judgments, and oversimplified travel commentary, although the first describes Ukraine, and the second, Poland:

Here, in this little village outside of Lviv, green space stretched before us and cows wandered about. A pastoral landscape. An agrarian idyll. Rurytania.<sup>18</sup>

Later in the text, we read:

The cot across from me belonged (...) to a Canadian with the surname Rigamonte. When he found out I was from Poland, he started to go on about how my country was a pristine civilization and about the little village grandmas with handkerchiefs tied around their heads. He told me about the quaint, pre-modern communities of village life, with all their traditions and rituals... like when someone dies, the neighbors all come to light candles and sing. Generally speaking, he told me, this society spared from the hideousness of modernity is a good, old agrarian idyll. Rurytania.<sup>19</sup>

Szczerek sets up this simplified schematic view to reveal how it is constructed partly on the basis of a fixation on the pure past, and partly as the product of an intellectual passivity characterized by a total lack of curiosity and a tendency to process reality as a series of idealizations and depreciations. These tourists are convinced of their own cultural superiority. They utilize travel precisely as a means for affirming their sense of self worth.

<sup>16</sup>See: D. Nowacki, op. cit.

<sup>17</sup>Z. Szczerek, op. cit., p. 217.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid, p. 84

<sup>19</sup>Ibid, p. 103

This mechanism plays out rather clearly in two passages. The first describes the organization of special trips that promise to “take a few Poles with a mean thirst for the exotic on a weekend to Ukraine and to show them the ‘hardcore East.’”<sup>20</sup> The narrator observes the four men on the trip: a member of the advisory board of a Krakow-based website, an accountant, the owner of a small tourism agency, and the manager of a club in Kazimierz. He takes stock of their remarks and sentiments, cataloging phrases such as: “it’s different here; you can smell it in the air,” or “it feels more like a cheap movie here,” which is to say, “it’s ugly.” This mechanism of neutralizing otherness and adorning it in exotic rags is reproduced throughout Szczerek’s book. The narrator remarks that the focus of these organized trips into Ukraine is fundamentally no different from that of trips organized for the British in Krakow.

The second passage describes photographing Ukraine and seeking out visual anomalies to immortalize and ultimately exhibit after squeezing them into the narrative frame of the Other. In short, “they turned Ukraine into a brothel on wheels.”<sup>21</sup>

Later on, in Krakow, they showed their photographs (...) and said that of course, over there in the Post-Soviet world, everything is terrible and terrifying, but these poor and beautiful people from Ukraine, these heroes of the East, they do what they can to live in dignity. (...)

Korwaks and his friends spoke of the dignity and honor of the people of the poor East, and meanwhile the crowded packs of cultural critics gazed at the photos and saw children splashing with pigs in the mud. Korwaks and his friends said that a proud, courageous people live in the East, cin-cin: and in the photo, a busted up babushka takes shelter under a roadside altar, with her legs spread no less. And everyone sees the busted up babushka 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, cin-cin: 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.”<sup>22</sup>

It is only against the backdrop of these episodes that we can detect signs of the transformation the narrator undergoes between the covers of *Mordor*. He confesses that in fact, he is just like the rest. He, too, is only after bread and circuses. But when he is asked if he is “hunting the wild East” he answers without hesitation that yes, he is, now and forever, but not like everyone else. What differentiates the narrator is his awareness that preconceived fantasies and the fictions he concocts do not conform to the reality of the actual place. This kind of “theory fatigue” must give way to the desire to test his former perceptive categories in experimental conditions. As a result, Szczerek begins to resemble Marianne Hirsch, whose journey to Czernowitz was a “post-memory practice” – the experience of one’s own presence in actual space and the act of exposing the self and its conceptual apparatus to an encounter with the

<sup>20</sup>Ibid, p. 187.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid, p. 122.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid, p. 122-123.

visuality, identity and cultural practices actually present “over there.”<sup>23</sup> No such encounter would be possible without movement, for movement precipitates a collision between theory and the concrete, intellectual categories and experience, and finally, meaning and presence. In the case of both Hirsch and Szczerek, this practice leads to a blurring between two modes for thinking about place: on the one hand, we are dealing with a replaceable world’s gaze at signs and an interaction with reality restricted to the constant work of interpreting an environment’s symbols. On the other hand, this is also an attempt to break away from a strategy premised on the lack of engagement, for it strives towards presence, full immersion in the actual place, and a willingness to accept new phenomena.<sup>24</sup>

This awareness of the insufficiencies of constant interpretation as a mode of relating to space and its compromised images provokes a desire to embed oneself in actual topography and to establish contact with a space replete with historical and contemporary meanings. Finally, this sense of inadequacy prompts a need to physically situate oneself among reality’s hard and material constituent parts. For Ubertowska, in *Ghosts of Home*, this work surfaces in the form of “wandering the local streets of this contemporary, Post-Soviet city and using old Austrian maps to find the sites linked to major events in the lives of Lotte and Carl Hirsch.”<sup>25</sup> In *Mordor’s Coming to Eat Us*, it is the direction of travel itself that propels the protagonist. Moving eastward coincides with traversing the road within. By physically traveling through Ukrainian towns, he is situating himself within the morass and observing phenomena that exist in Poland in intensified form. Yet the act of travel does not suffice on its own: what he needs is a different point of view. He can only undermine his notions of the “wild East” and “Post-Soviet jungle” by hitting on this third road. The third gaze allows him to open himself to the Thirdspace. Alongside Firstspace and the “directly-experienced world of empirically measurable and mappable phenomena”<sup>26</sup> whose signature feature is objectivity, and *Secondspace*, which is more subjective and generated from imagined and symbolic representations, we find Thirdspace: the attempt to break away from dialectical thought. For Edward Soja, this escape from the logic of “either/or” produces the more lucid logic of “that and also...”:

Thirdspace (...) is portrayed as multi-sided and contradictory, oppressive and liberating, passionate and routine, knowable and unknowable. It is a space (...) of multiplicitous representations, investigatable through its binarized oppositions but also where *il y a toujours l’Autre* (...). It is a meeting ground, a site of hybridity and *mestizaje* and moving beyond entrenched boundaries, a margin or edge where ties can be severed and also where new ties can be forged.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup>See: A. Ubertowska, op. cit., p. 273.

<sup>24</sup>See: T. Mizerkiewicz, *Po tamtej stronie tekstów. Literatura polska a nowoczesna kultura obecności*, Poznan 2013, pp. 180–181.

<sup>25</sup>A. Ubertowska, op. cit., p. 274.

<sup>26</sup>E.W. Soja, *Chapter 2 Thirdspace: Expanding the Scope of the Geographical Imagination*, in: *Architecturally Speaking: Practices of Art., Architecture, and the Everyday*, ed. A. Read, Londyn 2000, p. 17. Cited in: A. Nacher, *Telepleć. Gender w telewizji doby globalizacji*, Krakow 2008, p. 77.

<sup>27</sup>E.W. Soja, op. cit., p. 28. Cited in: A. Nacher, op. cit., Krakow 2008, p. 79.

For Szczerek's protagonist, this outside perspective is provided by people of non-Slavic origins. Their cultural backgrounds allow them to see Eastern Europe from the outside through perspectives that are geographically and emotionally distanced. As a result, their somewhat generalized observations ultimately clarify a sense of common ground:

"You Poles, you're rational people,' she said rather cautiously. I peered at her suspiciously. 'Well... so I assume. So explain to me, then, why every time I meet a Pole, he tells me about all the crazy things he's seen here. How everything is thoroughly fucked and nothing works. Every Pole I meet tells me some story from another planet. And yet –“furtively, Heike studied my reaction. “– You surely can't be so unreasonable that you don't see what I mean. Am I right?"<sup>28</sup>

The narrator's response to this question posed by Heike, a German, hardly clarifies things: "I would say you don't get Poland at all." The confusion that follows is much more revealing.

In this way, travel becomes a story in which certain relations (e.g., between power and topography, or history and memory) become transparent. To discover one's own experience in this network of mutual contingencies and forge a relation between self and place, these observers of Ukraine (Hirsch and Szczerek both) require their own tactics. Unlike strategy, these tactics are closer to Michel de Certeau's "art of the weak."<sup>29</sup> Entering into battle on foreign grounds (and yet the space of the tactic is always the space of the other), governed by the law of a foreign power,<sup>30</sup> they can indulge in the simplest, most humble activities: movement, walking around, travel. Moving through space (in travel writing, this activity is strictly textual) is implicated in the relation between history and memory discussed above. The narrator of *Mordor* is well aware of this connection:

So I walked into Ukraine. After a moment I looked around and took in this new reality that, only a second ago, had been an utterly ordinary, normal continuation of my own reality. Once I passed through the border town of Medyka, however, this reality veered away from mine to go down its own path.

I savored these differences, tasted this eastern silt in the air, the stuff of good old Galicia. I contemplated these faces that – if someone had nudged Stalin's pen just one millimeter to the side – would be driving cars of Polish make. Just one millimeter and they'd be our people, a million times over our people. And if this were the case, they wouldn't be worth a second glance (...).<sup>31</sup>

There is something troubling in this idea. On the sole basis of historical decisions, a group of people that could have been "ours" becomes strangers. Historical and geopolitical circumstances have turned Ukrainians into that "alien traumatic kernel" that "forever persists in [the] Neighbor...."<sup>32</sup> This formulation, proposed by Slavoj Žižek and so relevant to this context, succinctly articulates the inversion by which we inscribe otherness in the Neigh-

<sup>28</sup>Z. Szczerek, op. cit., p. 148.

<sup>29</sup>M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1984, p. 37.

<sup>30</sup>See: *ibid*, pp. 37-39.

<sup>31</sup>Z. Szczerek, op. cit., p. 44.

<sup>32</sup>S. Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute, Or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* London & New York, 2001, p. 109.

bor. The exploitation of the neighbor, which depends on a discernible resemblance and a sense that the same issues affect both parties, coincides with the kernel of otherness, and it is here that we can locate the impossibility of identification. In other words, the Proximate, or Neighbor, “remains an inert, impenetrable, enigmatic presence that *hystericizes* [the self].”<sup>33</sup>

Szczerek exposes this dynamic between resemblance, or sometimes even a total uniformity of experience and identity modes, in the traditional tourist's encounter. This perhaps becomes most clear in an episode where two Ukrainian children approach a dense crowd bottlenecked at the Lychakiv Cemetery in Lviv, muttering “give me Polish coins, mister.” The multicultural throng of tourists expresses a delight that quickly fades when the young beggars take the angle that they are Polish children who have been wronged, and that the Ukrainians are to blame. This instant and essentially hysterical, emotionally charged reaction might have something to do with Aleida Assmann's claim that “there is nothing that could prolong memory as forcefully as the mid-twentieth century catastrophe of destruction and forgetting.”<sup>34</sup>

*Mordor's Coming to Eat Us* is the product of an escalated crisis of memory. On the level of nationality, the cultural memory of generations to come (not so much construed from living memory as it is derived from media based on material reference points such as monuments, museums and archives) is commandeered by the politics of memory and forgetting. The transformation of memory from what is living and private to a contrived cultural consensus leads to problems such as the deformation, reduction or instrumentalization of the things we remember.<sup>35</sup> The image of Ukraine distorted by harmful stereotypes, seen as a country populated by bloodthirsty nationalists and wild and heartless brutes of the Steppe, is bluntly reinforced by literary depictions like “that Haidamaka brutishness” or “the wild folk of nature” (Sienkiewicz's phrase).<sup>36</sup> This portrait is not necessarily in harmony with Szczerek's perspective, although *Mordor* has no shortage of descriptions that fit this bill – take, for instance, “that stunted backwater so easy to mock.”<sup>37</sup>

We might find some hope for breaking apart the duopoly of history and institutional memory in the notion of post-memory. This term is differentiated from memory by generational distance, and from history, by a deep personal bond. Post-memory describes the experience of those whose upbringings were dominated by narratives cemented before they were born. If post-memory designates a specific form of memory more mediated by processes of imagination and narration than by recollection,<sup>38</sup> then in the context of tourism to the “Lost Polish

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>A. Assmann, *Przestrzenie pamięci. Formy i przemiany pamięci kulturowej*, trans. P. Przybyła, in: *Pamięć zbiorowa i kulturowa. Współczesna perspektywa niemiecka*, ed. M. Saryusz-Wolska, Krakow 2009, p. 110. (English translation via the Polish by Eliza Rose)

<sup>35</sup>See: *ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>36</sup>For more on stereotypical views of Ukrainians, see Rafał Kalukin's text: *Ukrainiec: Dziki kozak - wściekły banderowiec?*, <http://www.newsweek.pl/polska/ukraincy-stereotyp-ukrainca-w-polskiej-kulturze-newsweek-pl,artykuly,282885,1.html> (December 29 2017).

<sup>37</sup>Z. Szczerek, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

<sup>38</sup>See: M. Hirsch, *Family Pictures: Maus, Mourning, and Post-Memory*, in: “Discourse,” vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 8-9



Kresy,” it refers to a progression from the lament over a squandered past or (more flippantly) from “saving the bones of our forefathers”<sup>39</sup> to the self-reproach precipitated by disillusioned mental images and the discomfort of travel:

The visitors [Poles – CR] 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...<sup>40</sup>

The practice of wandering and the creation of post-memory directly inform the experience of those “roleplaying” their presence in a given place. The protagonists of *Ghosts of Home* improvise reenactments in significant places for the people of Czernowitz. In her text on Hirsch’s book, Aleksandra Ubertowska pays close attention to the “visualization of experience” and the narration of familiar stories within actual space as strategies for convincing oneself that a specific environment and geographic proximity are in fact capable of enhancing memory.<sup>41</sup> Hirsch includes in her book a note she made in her journal on September 6 of 1998 that observes something similar:

What’s different about hearing the same story, here, in the actual place? Because the stories in fact have not changed, they are all still the same. Few new ones have come, a few additional details, maybe. But it is different. This crossroads is so graphic, so immediate, and yet also so symbolic.<sup>42</sup>

In her commentary on this note, Ubertowska adds that memories rooted in actual space gain substance, dimensionality, texture and color. Actual space can therefore stimulate unrestrained emotions. Presence, however, is the requisite condition of this process. The whole project of post-memory practices is tied to physicality, and the necessary groundwork for conceiving a story is not narrative competence but a play of footsteps that give their shape to space and weave together place (to paraphrase de Certeau)<sup>43</sup> along with the “somatic letter:” the act of touching the object, exhausting oneself with travel, or occupying space in an actual location.<sup>44</sup> The protagonists of *Mordor* do precisely this. In the chapter devoted to their visit to Drohobycz, to memorialize the writer Bruno Schulz, they must necessarily visit the site of his death. The first person to mention this is a Polish photographer they meet by chance:

“Looking for Schulz?” he asked. “You’ll find the spot where they killed him because you’ll see a candle there. I lit it,” he said proudly.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>39</sup>This is Szczerek’s protagonist’s answer when the border guard asks about the reason for his visit to Ukraine (Z. Szczerek, op. cit., p. 7).

<sup>40</sup>Ibid, p. 12.

<sup>41</sup>See: A. Ubertowska, op. cit., p. 276.

<sup>42</sup>M. Hirsch, L. Spitzer, op. cit., p. 137.

<sup>43</sup>M. de Certeau, op. cit., p. 97.

<sup>44</sup>See: A. Ubertowska, op. cit., p. 276.

<sup>45</sup>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).

Later on, at the site of Schulz's death, the narrator adds:

The candle was there. It really was. It was at the bottom of some steps leading up to a bakery with a sign advertising FRESH BREAD. It was even burning. SO it was here that Schulz's corpse lay in the street for a whole day because, for some reason, the Germans wouldn't let anyone take it away. I tried to imagine it – Schulz lying there, small and dark, in a heavy winter overcoat – but my mind was totally blank.<sup>46</sup>

At the very end of the chapter, they meet Marzena and Bożena, two Polish Studies students from Warsaw, who have come to “to pay tribute to the great Polish-Jewish writer, the grand master of the Polish language (...) and, of course, to find the Street of Crocodiles.”<sup>47</sup>

What we described earlier as two travel strategies, one based on making a spectacle and seeking out the exotic, and the other on making a mockery of the first strategy, can be seen from one more perspective. We might find some value in Marielle Macé's proposal to approach these things in terms of style. Despite the fact that Macé applies categories of style to forms of literature that, for the reader, represent a set of appropriate situations and perspectival frames for reality, we might also divert the concept of style away from literature and the reading process. As a general concept, style refers to a certain mode of doing, speaking and changing. How might this help us read Szczerek's book? Consider this:

A person who reads is a style that looks upon another style, that looks out from the balcony of her own life and allows herself the freedom to change her way of being. At the heart of the way in which we use a literary work, in other words, is the opportunity for a veritable “stylistics of existence.”<sup>48</sup>

We might then posit that styles of perception will always be confronted by the style of a literary work, which in turn is derived from its author's mode of being. For Macé, who is reading Sartre, the dynamic between styles refers precisely to the experience of Venice that profoundly disrupts the French philosopher's conception of time and action.<sup>49</sup> Standing on his balcony, he loses himself in the visible:

The real Venice will always be somewhere other than where you find it. At least that's how I see it. I'll content myself, rather, on what I already have; but in Venice, I fall victim to a jealous madness (...). I go off on a hunt for this enigmatic city.<sup>50</sup>

Unable this clash of styles to bear, he leaps out of the frame he constructed for himself:

I need heavy, massive presences. I feel empty in the face of such diaphanous plumage painted on glass. I am going out.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>M. Macé, op. cit.

<sup>49</sup>See: *ibid.*

<sup>50</sup>J.-P. Sartre, op. cit., p. 68.

<sup>51</sup>J.-P. Sartre, op. cit., p. 73, cited in M. Macé, op. cit.

For Sartre, this other mode of being shocks him, and he has no choice but to face it as a challenge. Macé suggests that “[t]he Venetian landscape threatened Sartre, it wounded him in his duration, contradicted his inner rhythm, defied him.”<sup>52</sup> Her observations seem surprisingly applicable to the protagonist of *Mordor*. Significantly, the protagonist’s first visits to Ukraine were necessarily catered to the agendas of texts he wrote on commission for various websites. To put it mildly, his style bore the marks of persisting national stereotypes, or to be more blunt: lies: “I must have dazzled them with my Ukrainian drivel and dissimulation. It had to be filthy, strong, cruel. This is the gonzo essence.”<sup>53</sup>

For a few hours in Venice, Sartre experiences a different mode of being, a brief opportunity to choose a different project and sense “new ways of perceiving and behaving.”<sup>54</sup> Similarly, during his sojourn in Ukraine, *Mordor’s* protagonist is exposed to an “experience of rapid, fleeting beauty” that allows him to adopt a new cognitive posture, or perhaps even a new moral attitude.<sup>55</sup> Alongside the protagonist’s dialogues with his Ukrainian friend Taras, the conclusion of *Mordor* proves to be incredibly revealing. In the first scenario, the narrator throws out a phrase that is simultaneously banal and groundbreaking (in terms of its style). He suggests that Ukraine is a perfectly normal country that is merely poorly managed. In just a few sentences, Taras then manages to articulate all the features of Ukrainian tourism fueled by stereotypical images:

“You simply started looking at Ukraine through the eyes of a Ukrainian. Which means earlier, you saw us how? You came here to go on safari? This whole time? (...) What, orientalism, is that right? The exotic? You came here just like you’d go to a zoo?”<sup>56</sup>

The second passage is clear proof that the narrator is working on his own style and reckoning with himself and with the very way he enters a place and establishes a new empirical frame. For Macé, in *Venice from my Window*, the balcony turns out to be metaphor of utmost importance. In *Mordor’s Coming to Eat Us*, a sense of similar gravity is concentrated in the ending, which depicts the protagonist leaving Ukraine and the metaphor of a closed fist:

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.”<sup>57</sup>

<sup>52</sup>M. Macé, op. cit.

<sup>53</sup>Z. Szczerek, op. cit., p. 99.

<sup>54</sup>M. Macé, op. cit.

<sup>55</sup>M. Macé, op. cit.

<sup>56</sup>Z. Szczerek, op. cit., p. 218.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid, pp. 220-221.

As Macé would have it, Sartre's posture on the balcony offers an opening into our own lives. Similarly, as the narrator of *Mordor* gradually recognizes the damage inflicted by national stereotypes, we can treat his transformation as an expression of the difficulties of utilizing personal experience. The shame that floods the protagonist at the end of Szczerek's book becomes an opportunity for us to change our own habits, personalities and cultures: to experiment with ourselves as a style, or perhaps, rather, to accept the inconsistencies of our style, as well as its potential and limitations.<sup>58</sup> As it turns out, to emancipate this potential, we need outside interference. We also need to engage in a new space, or to "position" ourselves in new configurations.

<sup>58</sup>See: M. Macé, *op. cit.*

# KEYWORDS

*reportage*

*literary style*

**ABSTRACT:**

This article explores Ziemowit Szczerek's work of reportage, *Mordor's Coming to Eat Us: A Secret History of the Slavs*. In his analysis, the author applies Marianne Hirsch's conception of post-memory practices, Marielle Macé's conception of literary style, and Michel de Certeau's "spatial stories." This text attempts to map the traveler and reporter's transformations prompted by contact with actual geographical space.

*post-memory*

## THE CULTURE OF PRESENCE

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