The Autobiographical in Women's Writing: Redefinitions

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In contemporary scholarship, autobiography continues to be a subject of intense scrutiny, yet its contours have become increasingly blurred. The central challenge lies in delineating its boundaries and scope. Efforts to establish a conceptual framework depend not only on the methodological lens employed but also on whether one accepts, following Philippe Lejeune's influential argument, that an autobiographical reading is contingent upon the author's signature.[1]

The aim of this paper is to examine the presence and function of the autobiographical in selected novels by Maria Ukniewska,[2] a largely forgotten writer of the interwar period; Zyta Oryszyn,[3] a writer of the communist era; and two representatives of Polish contemporary literature, Magdalena Tulli and Joanna Bator. The analysis will address not only the autobiographical dimensions of these texts but also the genre-specific, aesthetic, and formal features that shape the broader landscape of Polish women's writing.

[1] Philippe Lejeune, On Autobiography, ed. John Eakin, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 3–30.

[2] Maria Kuśniewiczowa, née Brejnakowska, "was born on May 2, 1907, in Warsaw, the daughter of Roman Brejnakowski, a tailor, and Aleksandra, née Kopeć, a seamstress. After completing trade school, she continued her education at the Jadwiga Hryniewiecka Drama School. She later performed as a dancer in the Morskie Oko cabaret and occasionally appeared as an extra at the Polish Theatre and other variety theaters in Warsaw. In 1938, she launched her literary career under the pseudonym Maria Ukniewska. Fragments of her debut novel about the lives of variety dancers, Niedziela Teresy i przygody Dubenki [Teresa's Sunday and the Adventures of Dubenka], were published in Wiadomości Literackie [Literary News] (No. 8). The complete novel was subsequently released under the title Strachy [Fears]." All biographical information about the author is drawn from the digital bio-bibliographic dictionary Polscy pisarze i badacze literatury XX i XXI wieku [Polish Writers and Literary Scholars of the 20th and 21st Centuries], https://pisarzeibadacze.ibl.edu.pl/haslo/4277/ukniewska-maria, date of access 30 Aug. 2025.

[3] Anna Kaczyńska, née Bartkowska, was a writer, journalist, and translator. She made her literary debut in 1956 with short stories published in the daily Trybuna Wałbrzyska [Wałbrzych Tribune], and in 1970 released her first novel, Najada [Naiad]. During the 1980s, she was active in the Komitet Kultury Niezależnej [Independent Culture Committee], an underground cultural organization in communist Poland that supported independent writers, artists. She also collaborated with the Niezależna Oficyna Wydawnicza [Independent Publishing House], and from 1996 worked for the daily Rzeczpospolita. A member of the Polish PEN Club, she also contributed to underground magazines such as Tygodnik Wojenny [War Weekly], Wezwania [Calls], and Kultura Niezależna [Independent Culture]. She was also a translator. Between 1962 and 1972, she was married to the writer and poet Edward Stachura. All biographical information about the author is drawn from Instytut Książki []: https://instytutksiazki.pl/literatura,8,indeks-autorow-i-autorek,26,zyta-oryszyn,153.html?filter=, date of access 30 Aug. 2025.

The writers discussed in this article represent three distinct literary periods, which makes it impossible to analyze their novels within a single methodological framework. The central task, therefore, concerns drafting a new definition of the autobiographical and approaching it as a mode of reading that operates independently of the author's signature.

The Autobiographical and Women's Writing: A Theoretical Reflection

A methodological reflection on women's writing is, at its core, a reflection on the history of emancipation. Its theoretical basis draws not only on scholarly research but also on the metaphors and values that shape the text.[4] Within this framework, the concepts of arachnology—and, respectively, somatopoetics[5]—inform the examined novels. Nancy Miller[6] defines arachnology as "a critical positioning which reads against the weave of in-differentiation to discover the embodiment in writing of a gendered subjectivity; to recover within representation the emblem of its construction."[7] Explaining the unique nature of women's writing through the myth of Arachne and Athena is in itself a metaphorical construct. In this perspective, the woman writer becomes a weaver, producing the story from within herself, with the work intrinsically bound to her physicality.

Polish literary scholars, as Monika Świerkosz emphasizes,[8] have often read Nancy Miller's concept through a somatic lens. The scholar draws an analogy between writing and "spinning a web,"[9] suggesting that the writer resembles a spider "imprisoned forever in its web."[10] Such a reading of the myth of Arachne and Athena thus becomes a meditation on the autobiographical in women's writing.[11] Within the autobiographical community, the reader—the addressee—may explore and weave the text together with the writer. The result is irregular, fluid. It resembles a wave.

I propose that arachnology, as a mode of reading, and the theory of feminist waves, as a framework for tracing the evolution of feminist movements, can be complementary tools for examining women's writing and its autobiographical dimensions. In this perspective, autobiographical writing may be envisioned both as a spider's web—woven together by

[4] In Polish literary studies, Ewa Kraskowska has discussed methodologies of women's writing. See, for example, Ewa Kraskowska, "Powieść kobieca w czasach PRL" [The Women's Novel in the Polish People's Republic], in: Polskie pisarstwo kobiet w wieku XX: procesy i gatunki, sytuacje i tematy [Polish Women's Writing in the 20th Century: Processes and Genres, Situations and Themes], ed. Ewa Kraskowska, Bogumiła Kaniewska (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2015).

[5] See: Anna Łebkowska, "Jak ucieleśnić ciało: o jednym z dylematów somatopoetyki" [How to embody the body: The dilemmas of somatopoetics], Teksty Drugie 4 (2011): 11–27.

[6] See Nancy K. Miller, "Arachnologies: The Woman, the Text, and the Critic," in: Nancy K. Miller, Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1988), 77–101.

[7] Miller, 80.

[8] Monika Świerkosz, "Atena i Arachne. W stronę innej poetyki pisarstwa kobiecego" [Athena and Arachne: Towards a Different Poetics of Women's Writing], in: Monika Świerkosz, Arachne i Atena. Literatura, polityka i kobiecy klasycyzm [Arachne and Athena: Literature, Politics, and Female Classicism] (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2017), 18.

[9] Świerkosz, 18.

[10] Świerkosz, 18.

[11] See also: Grażyna Borkowska, Cudzoziemki. Studia o polskiej prozie kobiecej [Strangers: Studies in Polish Women's Fiction] (Warsaw: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 1996), 13. Quote after: Świerkosz, 18–19.

both the reader and the writer—and as a wave, which can reshape and transform the text, generating an autobiographical community of shared experiences.

"This Is Not My Diary:"[12] Maria Ukniewska's *Strachy* [Fears]

Maria Ukniewska, in her novel *Strachy*,[13] portrays the lives of young women working as variety dancers—a career she herself pursued in her youth. But are the experiences of her protagonists truly identical to those of the author? In a brief preface to the novel, Ukniewska appears to address this very question:

> Between the ages of eleven and thirteen, I was consumed by a passion for organizing amateur performances. And I was not alone. In the vast tenement building where I grew up, at least a hundred other children shared the same obsession. [...] My longing for the theater eventually turned into writing. Drawing on those early theatrical memories, I wrote the novel *Strachy*, which was published in 1938. [*Strachy* 10]

The novel, born of her "love for theater," is firmly rooted in Ukniewska's own experiences. The prefatory note explicitly underscores the writer's fascination with the stage. This raises the question: can *Strachy* be read as an autobiographical novel, in which the author herself enters into the autobiographical pact with the reader?[14] Philippe Lejeune, the French literary theorist who developed this concept, argued that a text qualifies as autobiographical if it bears the author's signature—it functions as a kind of contract with the reader. Teresa Sikorzanka, the protagonist of *Strachy*, should not be conflated with Maria Ukniewska, however, as her life is poorly documented, with little research and no biography to illuminate it. While modern autobiographical theory rightly builds upon the work of renowned scholars such as Philippe Lejeune, it must also recognize that each literary text articulates its own distinct theoretical framework.

Ukniewska did not write a novel that can be interpreted solely in autobiographical terms. Equally compelling is a reading of *Strachy* as an exploration of a collective female experience—of women who realized that emancipation has its contradictions. The heroines of Ukniewska's novel demonstrate how emancipatory slogans, championed, among others, in the magazine *Bluszcz* [Ivy], play out in practice. In *Strachy*, femininity and independence are paradoxical: every career path ultimately leads to men—immoral individuals, as it turns out—who reduce the heroines to objects, even attempting to regulate their most intimate bodily functions, such as their menstrual cycles.

[12]Maria Ukniewska said this in an interview for Ilustrowany Kurier Codzienny [Illustrated Daily Courier]. She further emphasized that the situations portrayed in the novel are fictional and that its heroines should not be equated with actual figures from the theatrical world. Agnieszka Baranowska comments on Ukniewska's statement, situating it within the broader reception of Strachy. She observes that reviews of the novel appeared in several prominent periodicals, including Kurier Literacko-Naukowy [Literary and Scientific Courier], Wiadomości Literackie [Literary News], and Sygnały [Signals]. See: Agnieszka Baranowska, "To nie mój pamiętnik" [This Is Not My Diary], in: Agnieszka Baranowska, Perły i potwory. Szkice o literaturze międzywojennej [Pearls and Monsters: Essays on Interwar Literature] (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1986), 236–248.

[13]Maria Ukniewska, Strachy, 7th ed. (Warsaw: Grupa Wydawnicza Foksal, 2016). All quotations are taken from this edition and will be cited directly in the main text following the format: title, page number. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from the original Polish-language version are translated by M.O.

[14]See: Lejeune.

One of the central themes of *Strachy*, apart from the struggles of variety dancers, lies in the representation of women's relationship to their own bodies. In Ukniewska's novel, the somatic dimension is inseparably bound to trauma and fear. This becomes evident in the fate of Linka, Teresa's friend, who experiences it firsthand when she becomes pregnant and chooses to undergo an abortion:

> The next hour unfolded like a grotesque, nightmarish vision. Behind the screen, water boiled on the stove. A sheet was spread across the table, soon drenched in blood. Linka lay exposed, her body bound with a belt, her arms and legs immobilized. For an instant, their eyes met—Linka's, wild with pain; Teresa's, wild with horror at the scene before her. [*Strachy* 112]

Abortion—perhaps the titular "fear"—is depicted in the novel as a profoundly somatic and terrifying experience. Teresa, too, is haunted by these "fears;" witnessing Linka's suffering, she dreads that she might one day face a similar fate. In time, Teresa herself becomes pregnant, having earlier entered into a relationship with Modecki, a theater director. Yet neither the relationship nor the prospect of starting a family fills her with happiness. As Magdalena Bednarek observes:

> In *Strachy*, Linka's fate serves as a dark mirror to Teresa's story. The two girls share a passion for dance, endure the hardships of cabaret life together, fall madly in love, and jointly confront the most socially, psychologically, and legally stigmatizing ordeal: Linka's pregnancy and abortion. Although Linka's suicide separates them, a sense of community persists—Linka continues to haunt Teresa, embodying her possible alternative destiny and becoming one of the novel's titular fears. [...].[15]

Bednarek captures the essence of the relationship between Linka and Teresa, who create a shared community of experiences and mutual support. Yet their story offers no hopeful resolution. Linka takes her own life, while Teresa, in choosing to pursue a relationship with Modecki, soon recognizes the gravity of her mistake.

Teresa's relationship with Modecki—marked by repeated abuse—embodies the bleak inversion of emancipation. What begins as an attempt at self-determination ultimately culminates in misery:

> You don't care about me. I miss the stage—I miss dancing, the makeup, my friends, the dressing room!... I'm suffocating. You bore me. You only ever talk about yourself, warning me again and again that you're finished. You received excellent reviews, but even that isn't enough for you. [...] You're selfish, that's what you are. You wanted a child, and now I'm the one who must give birth. I don't want this child! I'm terrified of childbirth. I'll die giving birth. Not a moment passes when I don't regret being with you. I never wanted this—you forced me. I'm young, I want to live. I hate you! And you hate me too. [*Strachy* 284]

The fulfillment of Teresa's deepest fears comes first with pregnancy and then with childbirth—a profoundly psychosomatic experience. Childbirth reverberates through her body while simultaneously wounding her psyche,[16] for in that moment Teresa recognizes that her life has been

[15]Magdalena Bednarek, "Powieść o kobiecym dojrzewaniu" [Female coming-of-age story], in: Polskie pisarstwo kobiet w wieku XX, 60.

[16]Magdalena Bednarek argues that Teresa's birth is a liminal experience, a rite of passage, the consequence of which is the woman's "social death" – she gives up her career, her own life. See: Bednarek, 59.

irreversibly altered, perhaps even ended. In *Strachy*, the experience of femininity is generational. Autobiographical writing expands into auto-socio-biography—a mode of life writing that establishes a communal narrative of women's experiences, fostering wider identification.

Madness and Transgression: On Community and Individual Experiences in Zyta Oryszyn's *Madam Frankensztajn* [Madame Frankenstein]

Reconstructing the autobiographical in Zyta Oryszyn's writing proves, as in the case of Maria Ukniewska, a challenging endeavor. Although Oryszyn's work has not been neglected in recent scholarship—Arleta Galant's studies are particularly noteworthy[17]—the autobiographical within her *oeuvre* remains less thoroughly examined. Oryszyn does not explicitly ground her novel in her own life; nevertheless, the experiences of her characters, and especially the heroines of *Madam Frankensztajn* [Madame Frankenstein],[18] may be seen as paralleling those of the author herself, who came of age and lived under the communist regime.[19]

Madam Frankensztajn may be described as a political—indeed an anti-communist—novel, one that dismantles the utopian vision theoretically grounded in egalitarianism. Madness becomes a lens for understanding the protagonists' disillusioned behavior. The women in Oryszyn's prose form a kind of community, which is often regarded as one of the defining generic characteristics of women's writing. Yet this community is not limited to generational experiences such as war, trauma, or life under an oppressive system. Oryszyn also binds the destinies of her heroines through acts of transgression, which can be understood in two ways: first, her novels interconnect, transcending textual boundaries not only through recurring themes but, more importantly, through how her female characters act.[20] Secondly, the protagonists continually transgress the boundaries of the "self," dissolving into one another through madness and confronting an otherness that ultimately proves to be nothing more than an untamed aspect of themselves. The experience of otherness thus forms the very foundation of *Madam Frankensztajn*, which revolves around its ontological status. The figure of the mysterious woman, discovered at a garbage dump, activates different cultural associations. The scar on her face earns her the nickname "Madame Frankenstein." If one assumes that this woman is a "monster," positioned as the radical "other," it might be inferred that such a status grants her unique understanding and sensitivity—though it certainly does not bring her happiness. Such an interpretation would

[17]See: Arleta Galant, "Wariatki na prowincji. Pisarstwo Zyty Oryszyn" [Provincial Madwomen: Zyta Oryszyn's Prose], in: Arleta Galant, Prowincje literatury. Polska proza kobiet po 1956 roku [Literary Provinces: Polish Women's Prose after 1956] (Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego, 2014), 28–52; Arleta Galant, "Dywersje Zyty Oryszyn" [Zyta Oryszyn's Diversions], in: Pisarstwo kobiet pomiędzy dwoma dwudziestoleciami [Women's Writing between the Interwar Period and the Fall of Communism], ed. Inga Iwasiów, Arleta Galant (Cracow: Universitas, 2011), 329–342.

[18]Zyta Oryszyn, Madam Frankensztajn. Czarna iluminacja [Madam Frankenstein. Black Illumination] (Warsaw: Oficyna Wydawnicza Volumen, 2009). All quotations are taken from this edition and will be cited directly in the main text following the format: title, page number. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from the original Polish-language version are translated by M.O.

[19]Galant argues that that women's "private narratives" can be seen as "an attempt to translate personal experience into a public language." See: Galant, "Dywersje Zyty Oryszyn," 334.

[20]Galant notes the connection between Madam Frankensztajn and Czarna iluminacja [Black Illumination]. See: Galant, "Wariatki na prowincji," 42.

be thoroughly Romantic.[21] Yet Romantic notions of transgression and fascination with the ontological status of ghosts, apparitions, and monsters cannot fully account for the behavior—or, more broadly, the very existence—of the titular Madame.

Indeed, the strange woman found at a garbage dump provokes not only fear but also curiosity. Yet this Madame is not portrayed in a genuinely Romantic fashion—one that would demand we interpret her through the prism of the "third eye," her superhuman cognitive and imaginative powers. In Oryszyn's novel, every element, including the protagonists' lives, is subordinated to a rigid ideal. The system, which once promised equality and social justice, ultimately revealed itself as an unattainable utopia in theory and, in practice, a bloody and ruthless totalitarian regime. Madame Frankenstein is described by Galant as "a child of the system, and at the same time its error."[22] Galant points to her affinity with the heroine of *Czarna iluminacja* [Black Illumination],[23] who, seduced by the allure of communism, became its devoted adherent and fervent advocate. Oryszyn's heroines are often women marked by devastation—scarred by war, uprooted through displacement, and crushed beneath the weight of a system whose very essence eludes comprehension. This inability to grasp its logic breeds alienation, a condition that leads to madness. Maria, the novel's protagonist, declares:

> The word communism meant nothing to me: it was a political party, a hand with a million fingers, a poem one had to memorize to get a good grade. It remained a slogan—painted on walls, printed in textbooks, echoed in newspapers. I could see it every day, yet it was the everydayness of the sun: sometimes startling me with its feverish blaze, sometimes with its absence, and at other times with its relentless, unyielding presence. [*Madam Frankensztajn* 20]

Communism emerges as a poem, a slogan that resists comprehension. Oryszyn's novel makes it clear: women seduced by communist ideals become estranged, consumed by madness that borders on being possessed. The limited autobiographical traces in Oryszyn's work make it impossible to fully identify her lived experience, yet one may suspect that the author—playing a subtle game—threads fragments of her own life into the fabric of her fiction.[24] A similar strategy can be observed in the prose of Magdalena Tulli.

Autobiography as Play and Creation: The Prose of Magdalena Tulli and Joanna Bator

Magdalena Tulli's *oeuvre*, though inaugurated with *Dreams and Stones*[25]—a cosmogenic narrative rich in metaphorical potential—is not confined to the construction of undefined,

[21] See also: Maria Janion, "Upiór z Upity. Wobec milczenia trupa" [The Phantom of Upita: The Silence of the Corpse], in: Maria Janion, Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna. Fantazmaty literatury [Uncanny Slavdom: Phantasms of Literature] (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2006), 125–161.

[22] Galant, "Dywersje Zyty Oryszyn," 335.

[23] Oryszyn.

[24] Agnieszka Czyżak, "Przepisywanie siebie, przepisywanie obcości – przypadek Zyty Oryszyn" [Rewriting oneself, rewriting otherness – The case of Zyta Oryszyn], Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich [Questions of Literary Genres] 2 (2014): 104.

[25] Magdalena Tulli, Dreams and Stones, trans. Bill Johnson (New York: Archipelago Books, 2004).

ostensibly universal worlds. In several of her novels, the writer remains anchored in tangible, named, and at times even autobiographical realities.

Szum [Noise][26] and *Włoskie szpilki* [Italian High Heels][27] appear to mark a new phase in Tulli's literary trajectory.[28] While they continue to employ metaphorical and spatially inventive modes of narration, they simultaneously introduce fresh contexts, among them autobiographical dimensions. The autobiographical in Tulli's work remains an elusive category: despite numerous hints suggesting a strong affinity between the authorial self and the novelistic self, it is difficult to draw a clear boundary between them.

The central figure in both *Szum* and *Włoskie szpilki* is an unnamed girl who vies for the attention of her absent, emotionally distant mother. At the same time, she must make her way through a world that resembles a dark forest, hostile and disorienting. Her mother, a concentration camp survivor, is unable to navigate the fractured postwar reality and, consequently, cannot provide the support her daughter so desperately seeks:

> The mother's reality is a world stripped of emotions and affects. Even before her illness, there was no space for a child, least of all an infant whose very existence depends on the simplest affective exchanges. A negative stimulus triggers a reaction, demanding the caregiver's response. Yet the mother spent her entire postwar life attempting to interrupt and dismantle this sequence: stimulus followed by affective response, experience followed by emotional reaction. The Holocaust, as a defining "event," irreversibly altered the structure of her affects. It deprived her of the capacity to experience them in the present, in the real, rather than one perpetually overshadowed by trauma.[29]

The unnamed girl, the narrator of the novel, is caught between two worlds: her father's Italian life, from which she is largely excluded, and postwar Poland, where she lives with her emotionally unavailable mother. A biographical reading of both *Szum* and *Włoskie szpilki* may therefore be grounded, among other factors, in the complexities of strained family relationships. In conversation with Justyna Dąbrowska,[30] Magdalena Tulli confesses that she remembers vividly what it was like to be a little girl, which is why, as a mother, she always cared for her children's feelings.[31] This interview also reveals numerous details from Tulli's life that inform *Szum* and *Włoskie szpilki*. Tulli acknowledges that her relationship with her mother was difficult, reflects

[26]Magdalena Tulli, Szum [Noise] (Cracow: Znak, 2014). All quotations are taken from this edition and will be cited directly in the main text following the format: title, page number. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from the original Polish-language version are translated by M.O.

[27]Magdalena Tulli, Włoskie szpilki [Italian High Heels], 3th ed. (Warsaw: Nisza, 2014). All quotations are taken from this edition and will be cited directly in the main text following the format: title, page number. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from the original Polish-language version are translated by M.O.

[28]This observation is made, among others, by Ewa Wiegandt, who highlights the autobiographical "I" in Włoskie szpilki and thereby invites readers to search for similar autobiographical traces throughout Tulli's other novels. See: Ewa Wiegandt, "«To» Magdaleny Tulli" [Magdaleny Tulli's "It"], Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne. Seria Literacka [Poznań Polish Studies. Literary Series] 22 (2013).

[29]Justyna Tabaszewska, "Zatarte tryby teraźniejszości. Afektywne struktury czasowe w twórczości Magdaleny Tulli" [Blurred Modes of the Present: Affective Temporal Structures in the Works of Magdalena Tulli], Teksty Drugie [Second Texts] 5 (2020): 96–120.

[30]Magdalena Tulli w rozmowie z Justyną Dąbrowską. Jaka piękna iluzja [Magdalena Tulli in conversation with Justyna Dąbrowska: What a Beautiful Illusion] (Cracow: Znak, 2017).

[31]Magdalena Tulli w rozmowie z Justyną Dąbrowską. Jaka piękna iluzja, p. 27.

on her mother's experiences in the concentration camp and subsequent emotional withdrawal, and recalls her Italian heritage, as well as struggles at school and conflicts with peers:

> [...] After the war, my mother was unprepared for the closeness that children instinctively expect from their mothers. Something had been taken from her—something she no longer possessed—and so she could not give it. Yet she was still compelled to respond to that expectation in some way.
>
> My behavior seemed strange and unsettling to others, and as a result, strangers kept their distance. Their distance denied me the chance to learn, and without that chance, they continued to keep away. I did make progress, but only slowly, and so I fell further and further behind. [...] The sadness lingered for years; in time, one could grow accustomed to it and simply live with it.[32]

The author's signature is not, of course, the sole determinant of an autobiographical reading. Yet in Tulli's case, it enables a deeper understanding of the girl's behavior—she, like the author, belongs to the postmemory generation.[33] Tulli writes her life into the novel, though in a deliberately subversive manner. She plays a game with the reader: on the one hand, she oscillates between biography and literary fiction, offering no guarantee of truth and refusing to enter into Lejeune's autobiographical pact. On the other hand, she provides a form of testimony that exceeds the boundaries of autobiography or autofiction, one that assumes a generational dimension and breaks the cycle of silence.[34]

Joanna Bator, like Magdalena Tulli, does not want the reader to identify the narrator/main character with the author herself. Significantly, Bator often advocates for an anti-biographical reading of her novels, thereby establishing firm boundaries between literary fiction and authorial identity. This approach is particularly evident in *Ciemno, prawie noc* [Dark, Almost Night].[35] An autobiographical interpretation of the novel may appear impossible at first glance. Yet when Alicja's narrative reaches its conclusion, the author directly addresses the reader, writing:

> Wałbrzych and Książ Castle—whose last mistress was Princess Daisy—are real. Everything else is a product of my imagination. Do not search for these places or people beyond the text; you will not find them there.[36]

A biographical reading is possible despite the (anti-)autobiographical pact—for such a reading need not function as a pact but rather as a mode of interpretation. Bator herself acknowledges this in the collection *Wyspa Łza od nowa. Esej intymny* [Tear Island Reborn: An Intimate Essay],[37]

[32]Magdalena Tulli w rozmowie z Justyną Dąbrowską. Jaka piękna iluzja, pp. 151, 152.

[33]See: Wiegandt.

[34]Dorota Głowacka, among others, has written about the inexpressibility of the Holocaust, emphasizing the need to search for a language capable of conveying its traumatic reality. See: Dorota Głowacka, "Wsłuchując się w ciszę. Estetyka pamięci o Zagładzie według Jean-François Lyotarda" [Listening to Silence: The Aesthetics of Holocaust Memory According to Jean-François Lyotard], Teksty Drugie 1-2 (2007): 41–59.

[35]Joanna Bator, Ciemno, prawie noc [Dark, Almost Night], 6th ed. (Warsaw: Grupa Wydawnicza Foksal, 2019). All quotations are taken from this edition and will be cited directly in the main text following the format: title, page number. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from the original Polish-language version are translated by M.O.

[36]Joanna Bator, "Od autorki" [Author's Afterword], in: Joanna Bator, Ciemno, prawie noc, p. 491.

[37]Joanna Bator, Wyspa Łza od nowa. Esej intymny [Tear Island Reborn: An Intimate Essay] (Cracow: Znak, 2020). All quotations are taken from this edition and will be cited directly in the main text following the format: title, page number. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from the original Polish-language version are translated by M.O.

a self-referential, meta-literary meditation on travel and place. Within this framework, the metaphor of "zahaczka" [hook] informs the reading of *Ciemno, prawie noc*. As Bator writes:

> "Zahaczka" is the feminine form of the word "haczyk" [hook], associated with expressions such as "by hook or by crook" or "to be on the hook." Meanwhile, "zahaczka" is used to catch a thread and weave it into a story [...]. In this sense, "zahaczka" functions as a bio-grapheme: fragments of a body once touched—birthmarks, scars, smells, tastes—living sites of memory where the experience of real life, often fragmented, unclear, and strange, insists on being acknowledged, even demands that "something must be done with it." [*Wyspa Łza od nowa. Esej intymny* 125–126]

"Zahaczka" thus serves as the foundation for weaving a narrative that embraces subjectivity, remains grounded in lived experience, and resists the neutrality of reportage. Instead, it transforms reality into a creative source—one that is continually reshaped and concretized by imagination. From these observations, several conclusions emerge: Bator employs "zahaczka" as a means of filtering personal experience through the lens of literary fiction. Biographical detail informs the narrative, yet it is never subsumed by it. Through the mechanism of "zahaczka," individual experience finds expression in relation to a specific space, forging a connection between person and place:

> Travel inscribes itself on the body with scars and stains—sunburn, insect bites, the sting of poisonous weeds. It splinters our nails, erodes our teeth, and unsettles our stomachs. It invites viruses, bacteria, and fungi to take root within us, until the true traveler becomes a living hybrid: part botanical garden, part zoo. [*Wyspa Łza od nowa. Esej intymny* 197]

Particularly significant in the context of Alicja Tabor's relationship with Wałbrzych is the recognition that the past does not unfold as a purely logical or linear sequence of events. The fabric of life and the fabric of narrative are not identical but remain in constant interplay. The autobiographical in Bator's work is best approached through the lens of autofiction—an ever-evolving form that resists closure and expands across multiple spaces. Alicja and the author share a nomadic sensibility; they keep searching for the right place. Yet the best one is ultimately the one already inscribed within the story.

Space as a Source of Oppression and Fear: Ukniewska and Oryszyn

Autobiographical places,[38] as sites of individual memory, shed their objective status and are transformed into imaginary constructs that exist solely in the consciousness of the experiencing subject. In women's writing, place serves not only as a literary marker but as a means of examining how space is inhabited through personal and intimate experience. Polish women's literature shows many places tied to personal and autobiographical experience. In Maria Ukniewska's *Strachy* and Zyta Oryszyn's *Madam Frankensztajn*, space is tied to oppression and the struggle against patriarchal violence.

The concept of space in Ukniewska's novel is closely tied to the discourse of interwar emancipation. Central to this context is the figure of the *New Woman*, emblematic of emancipation circles at the

[38]Małgorzata Czermińska, "Miejsca autobiograficzne. Propozycja w ramach geopoetyki" [Autobiographical Places: Towards a Geopoetic Framework], Teksty Drugie 5 (2011): 183–200.

time, who embodied economic and sexual independence and the freedom to shape her own life and career. Yet space in Ukniewska's narrative reveals a less glamorous dimension of emancipation: for women who pursued professional paths, space was marked not only by opportunity but also by social oppression and harsh living conditions. Teresa, the novel's protagonist, comes to embody this tension, confronting the costs of emancipation alongside its promises:

> They live on the third floor, confined to a long, narrow room. Yet climbing those stairs in darkness is unbearable—pale shapes flicker in the corners by the windows, and dreadful memories resurface! Only last year, a musician ended his life here with a revolver. The reason why does not matter. What lingers is the place—these very stairs! [*Strachy* 25]

The space inhabited by Teresa and her family conjures the titular fears that haunt the staircase. It is marked by the memory of a suicide, which further affects how Teresa and her family live in their cramped, ill-adapted apartment. Ukniewska depicts this living space with stark realism, reflecting the social conditions of the time:[39] large families, unable to secure adequate housing, were often forced to share a single, overcrowded room. The novel captures this intimacy and constraint with striking detail. When Teresa goes to bed, her sisters Weronika and Klara are already there, sleeping: "They were cramped in that bed, but warm" (*Strachy* 27).

Teresa's life is shaped by the hardships of everyday existence—poverty, inadequate housing, and the relentless demands of theater work. In the novel, the theater emerges as an even more oppressive space than her home. It is there that Teresa painfully discovers that self-determination and professional ambition are inseparable from constant struggles: the fight for recognition, the demand for fair wages, and the need to resist intrusive male advances. The world of *Strachy* is marked by oppression, not only in its spaces but also in the behaviors of certain characters—particularly the men who attempt to reduce the variety dancer's profession to that of a "lady of the night." Teresa's body, once an asset and a means of livelihood, becomes emptied of promise, deprived both of her aspirations and even of sustenance. For Ukniewska, the body itself becomes a site of evil, abuse, and, ultimately, of "fears."

In *Madam Frankensztajn*, we encounter a similar—though not identical—attempt to show social oppression through space. The novel opens with the depiction of a queue waiting in front of a grocery shop, a common scene from the communist era, one that immediately situates the reader in a world of scarcity and constraint. For the protagonist, the store's space is not merely physical but symbolic: stifling, uncomfortable, and saturated with the sense of inevitable failure:

> The arrival of the goods struck me like a blow to the ribs, sharp and cracking. Before I could brace myself, the woman in a red beret—standing in the spot that should have been mine—thrust her hip and shoulder with such force that I was expelled from the queue like a knocked-out tooth. I checked my buttons. *I can't get back in*, I thought. *I won't buy carp*, I thought. A tear slid across my cheek. *I'm not going home*, I thought. *There's a razor blade in my purse—too bad I'm not a man*, I thought. [*Madam Frankensztajn* 11]

[39]Polish interwar prose frequently engaged with the theme of precarious housing, highlighting its direct impact on the protagonists' well-being and daily existence. A notable example is Zbigniew Uniłowski's social novel Wspólny Pokój [A Common Room], which portrays the everyday struggles of artists. See: Zbigniew Uniłowski: Wspólny pokój [A Common Room] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Współczesne, 1932).

For Maria, the brutal expulsion from the queue becomes a catalyst for reflection on her place within both family and society. To be a man, she realizes, would mean the freedom to respond to the aggression of the woman in the red beret. Her social position, shaped as much by gender as by class, dictates a prescribed mode of behavior. The store's space emerges as a prison—not due to its physical constraints or the impossibility of movement, but because of systemic limitations. Communist ideology, the centrally planned economy, endless queues, and pervasive "shortages"—not only of goods but of opportunities—define the oppressive architecture of everyday life:

> I went to the bathroom as if it were an office. I sat on the toilet seat, hooked the door, and closed my burning eyes. The stench did not bother me—I had spent nearly my entire life in small, foul-smelling rooms. During the war: night after night in a squalid, clay-dark shelter carved beneath a barn, deep in the Bieszczady Mountains. Thirteen years here, in a kitchen in Leśny Brzeg, on a couch shoved beneath the sink. Now I sleep in the same place, on the same couch, greasy slops gurgling in the same sink. Five years at a university in Warsaw, confined to a servant's room without a window. Five years with Emeryk in a rented bathroom with a single window in Saska Kępa. […] If a murderer had entered any of my rooms, there would have been nowhere to retreat […]. [*Madam Frankensztajn* 13]

The protagonist's quarters are cramped, unsuited to her needs, ugly, and uninviting. It is hardly surprising, then, that the titular Madame is discovered at a garbage dump. In Oryszyn's novel, space itself becomes a vehicle for alienation and otherness. For Maria, life under the communist regime serves as a continual reminder of her exclusion, forcing her to exist in the shadow of family and wartime traumas.

The Autobiographical Potential of Geopoetics: The Creation of Space in the Prose of Magdalena Tulli and Joanna Bator

For many years, contemporary Polish literature has demonstrated a sustained engagement with literary topographies, the spatial turn, and geopoetics. This conceptual framework owes much to the work of Elżbieta Rybicka,[40] whose scholarship, in the Polish context, has significantly deepened reflection on the spatial dimensions of literature. It is worth emphasizing, however, that geopoetics—according to the most recent developments—is no longer confined to defining the relationship between literary texts and place. Rather, it has evolved into an interdisciplinary interpretive method. As such, it allows one to integrate the perspectives of memory studies, the autobiographical, and space.

The autobiographical in Magdalena Tulli's novels is frequently interpreted through the lens of family trauma, her fraught relationship with her mother, and the experience of growing up in an environment marked by a lack of support and acceptance. Yet in *Szum* and *Włoskie Szpilki* these interpretive categories may be enriched by spatial contexts. In *Szum*, the forest emerges as a particularly significant space. It functions as a refuge for the emotionally wounded girl, offering her a new—open, liberating—space, free from both mental and material constraints. By

[40]See: Elżbieta Rybicka, Geopoetyka. Przestrzeń i miejsce we współczesnych teoriach i praktykach literackich [Geopoetics: Space and Place in Contemporary Literary Theories and Practices] (Cracow: Universitas, 2014).

contrast, *Włoskie Szpilki* foregrounds the contrast between Milan and Warsaw. This binary invites an autobiographical reading, fully justified by the author's Polish and Italian family background, and highlights the tension between cultural belonging and displacement. The protagonist's father does not reside permanently in Poland, and the Italian reality becomes woven into the memories and history of growing up in Warsaw. Italy appears as a space of leisure and vacation, while Warsaw embodies mundane everyday life:

> It seemed that of the two worlds—one beautiful, the other ugly; one kind, the other hostile—only one could be real. And we were told it was the ugly, hostile one. At every turn, we were persuaded that this world was better, more honest, and, paradoxically, more beautiful precisely because of its ugliness. [*Włoskie szpilki* 97]

Both spaces are grounded in the protagonist's individual experience, though—as one quickly notices—in markedly different ways. Postwar Poland is depicted as a country governed by trauma and anxiety about the future. Milan, by contrast, is rendered in lighter tones; the unnamed narrator remarks that "the trees and buildings looked strange without the familiar veneer of gray" [*Włoskie szpilki* 96].

This trauma and anxiety extend beyond Warsaw, encompassing her mother's memories of the concentration camp. In Tulli's prose, the concentration camp becomes an autobiographical place—a site of memory inscribed into family history. Małgorzata Czermińska's typology identifies several forms of autobiographical places; within the structure of Tulli's novel, it can be understood as an imagined place, one that exists at the intersection of personal memory and collective history:

> In the construction of autobiographical imagined places—that is, spaces associated with geographical spaces the writer has never personally accessed—family tradition assumes a central role. Genealogy, while significant for places directly remembered, becomes the very foundation of imagined places. This phenomenon is particularly evident among second-generation migrants. For them, the past is not accessible through lived memory but through imaginative attachment to an inaccessible space. The image of such a place emerges through the shaping power of family narratives and cultural myth, rather than through direct, embodied experience.[41]

The imagined place is, of course, deeply anchored in postmemory: the concentration camp exists through the mother's testimony—through the story of her personal tragedy. Yet beyond the framework of "imagination," this particular site of memory may also be understood through the lens of "dispersion." The dispersed space of the concentration camp is bound to the mother's transgressive stance, shaped by the fluidity of memory itself—Alzheimer's disease erases recollections, but never entirely or permanently. Memories are safeguarded by the daughter, who becomes the inheritor of her mother's narrative of (un)forgotten spaces. The concentration camp thus emerges, on the one hand, as an imagined place, and, on the other, as a dispersed one.

The construction of autobiographical places in Joanna Bator's *Ciemno, prawie noc* parallels those found in Magdalena Tulli's prose. Both authors intertwine autobiographical experience with

[41]Czermińska, 194.

spaces that actively shape and define that experience. In *Ciemno, prawie noc*, the story of the town transcends the conventional framework of place-based storytelling. The autobiographical potential of geopoetics here is rooted above all in the author's intimate engagement with familiar locations—most notably with Wałbrzych, Bator's hometown. Although the author resists identification with the novel's narrator, Wałbrzych nonetheless emerges as an autobiographical space, partly through the use of the aforementioned "zahaczka."

Wałbrzych thus becomes a distinctive site of memory, one conspicuously devoid of sacralization—in fact, a counter-model to the "literature of small homelands." The town is ugly, chaotic, and in architectural disarray; its external decay mirrors its spiritual decay. By contrast, Alicja resides in Warsaw, a modern metropolis, rich in opportunities. In Bator's novel, geopoetics draws upon cultural stereotypes: modernized Wrocław stands in stark opposition to neglected Wałbrzych. Yet these stereotypes are not merely invoked—they are powerfully reinforced by the narrative itself. Wałbrzych appears repulsive, just as the behavior of its inhabitants is repulsive; evil flourishes in spaces stripped of identity. The town lacks identity:

> I watched people vanish swiftly into the underground passage, and a crushing sense of loneliness overtook me—so heavy that I could scarcely make myself walk toward the train station. Inside, the building seemed deserted. On the wall, someone had scrawled: "Górnik F.C. sucks" and "Górnik F.C. rules." Perhaps the newcomer was already being pressed to choose, sealing his fate before even exploring the town. [*Ciemno, prawie noc* 13]

> I gazed at the sleeping town: [...] the *Apollo* cinema, its blueberry façade dulled and scratched; the *Oleńka* confectionary, still serving doughnuts and cakes for special occasions; and the Roma tenement houses on Pocztowa Street, clinging to life with their last remaining strength. [*Ciemno, prawie noc* 15]

Wałbrzych greets Alicja with coldness, strangeness, and an elusive sense of alienation. Confronted with crumbling buildings, drifting clouds of cigarette smoke, and the repulsiveness of passersby, the narrator keenly perceives that evil inhabits the city. In this context, it is worth recalling Agnieszka Czyżak's category of the "non-town," which alludes to Marc Augé's notion of the non-place.[42] Wałbrzych emerges here as a space "alien, devoid of positive values, impossible to tame and to recognize as one's own."[43]

Yet urban space is not the only terrain Alicja Tabor traverses. The protagonist and narrator also returns to her family home, itself a kind of non-place. Like Wałbrzych, the home functions as a site of memory—a repository of both recollections and traumas. Alicja's childhood in a dysfunctional household can be read as analogous to the shaping of Wałbrzych: the memory of the town becomes inseparable from individual memory. Bator constructs a palimpsest narrative in which overlapping stories generate an increasingly complex and heterogeneous image.

[42]Marc Augé, Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity, trans. John Howe (London and New York: Verso, 1995).

[43]Agnieszka Czyżak, "Nie-Miasto Joanny Bator" [Joanna Bator's Non-Town], Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia Poetica 2 (2014): 46–47.

Autobiographical Worlds: Poetics and Form. Conclusion

The study of the autobiographical in Polish women's writing involves more than reconstructing individual experiences within external or spatial contexts. Equally crucial is the exploration of the narrative forms that shape autobiographical expression. The storytelling techniques employed in the analyzed novels vary considerably, yet they consistently foreground the female perspective—that is, and ought to remain, central to women's writing. Unsurprisingly, drawing on Stanzel's typology, the most prevalent narrative modes are the first-person narrative situation (as in the works of Oryszyn, Tulli, and Bator) and the personal narrative situation (as in Ukniewska's novel).[44] At first glance, the first-person mode appears ideally suited to conveying autobiographical experience. Yet this is only an illusion. The autobiographical, even at the level of narrative, can operate as a game—one that encodes and conceals meaning beneath the surface of the text.

In my view, the author does not need to vouch for the autobiographical with her signature. Even if the author acknowledges that the novel draws upon her memories and experiences, this does not alter the fundamental fact that the autobiographical in literature is always a construct: it actively shapes the subject, the narrative situation, and even events that may be rooted in reality but are inevitably refracted through the fictional framework of the novel.

How, then, can autobiographical experience be expressed so that life writing becomes creative rather than merely confessional? The answer lies in the narrative, which simultaneously reveals and encrypts meaning, while centering the experiencing subject, whose perspective and lived reality remain paramount. The formal parameters of autobiographical writing are inherently fluid; each text articulates its own theory. The manner in which the novel constructs its subject, though marked by fictionality, does not preclude biographical interpretation. For this reason, the autofictional cannot be understood in isolation from the autobiographical. Every autofictional text is autobiographical, and every autobiographical text is, in turn, an autofictional creation of the subject. The prefix *auto* signifies a form of vivisection—an introspective probing of the self—that nevertheless does not invalidate fiction.

All the novels examined here share a defining characteristic: they hover between the reconstruction and the deconstruction of autobiographical experience. The lives of their protagonists unfold as singular struggles—against the system, against the past, against family. These conflicts are simultaneously explicit within the narrative and yet subtly concealed, much like the autobiographical references themselves. It is for this reason that the metaphor of waves—waves that dissolve and reshape experience—becomes central to my exploration of the autobiographical in Polish women's writing. The act of reconstruction thus emerges as a collective endeavor, undertaken by the author, the reader, and the broader interpretive community, all of whom recognize the creative potential embedded in female experience.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

[44]See: Franz Stanzel, A Theory of Narrative, trans. Charlotte Goedsche (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 200–232.

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KEYWORDS

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Abstract:
Polish literary scholars have long examined the autobiographical dimensions of women's writing from a variety of perspectives. In light of recent theoretical developments, however, this category invites renewed consideration. New interpretive tools allow for the redefinition and deconstruction of traditional autobiographical practices grounded in the autobiographical pact with the reader. The novels of Maria Ukniewska, Zyta Oryszyn, Magdalena Tulli, and Joanna Bator, analyzed here as case studies, extend the theoretical framework of the autobiographical by embedding it within the contexts of personal and generational experiences, the representation of space, and formal experimentation. Although these novels articulate the "self" in diverse ways, they converge around female subjectivity—often shaped by external conditions—and suggest that an autobiographical reading need not depend on the authorial signature. Instead, it may be understood as a mode of reading that opens a communal space of interpretation and shared experiences.

TRAUMA

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING

novel

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