



Rubble or Resurrection: Contextualising London Literature by Polish Migrants to the UK

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Introduction

<1>In the wake of the enlargement of the European Union in May 2004, hundreds of thousands of Poles have come to the United Kingdom in order to work and improve the financial situation of their families back home. Many of these migrants have settled down in London. As a walk through Ealing, for instance, reveals, Polish delis, bakeries and hairdressers have become an integral part of the cityscape. Statistics and sociological research suggest that the majority of new Polish migrants to the UK are young and educated individuals who have arrived in Britain as labour migrants (Fihel). They often choose London as their destination for practical reasons: the city can easily be reached from Poland by cheap airlines, its size translates into a considerable job market and the already extant Polish community in London provides a helpful network. However, several critics argue that London is also attractive for young Polish people because to them it embodies a modern, transcultural metropolis teeming with opportunities.

<2>Social anthropologist Michał Garapich emphasises that for Poles the UK's appeal has an overt material dimension, and he draws attention to the particular attraction exerted by the British capital:

British pragmatism and the free market make it possible for [Polish] migrants to perceive the British Isles as the fulfilment of their dreams of a genuine meritocracy. [...] London appears so attractive [...] because the number of potential encounters, human relationships, life-course scenarios, life-changing events, etc. is nearly infinite. [...] with many Polish migrants we find a curious mixture of fatalism and individualism, of the conviction that luck is the determining factor and the belief that in London, it is sufficient to want to work in order to gain esteem and money. (69, 72)

[1]

According to Garapich, these high expectations do not always translate into a fulfilling experience of migration. Instead, many young and educated Polish nationals fail to find jobs that are equivalent to their qualifications. Statistics reveal that among migrants, Poles work the longest hours and at the same time earn the least money (70). In addition, they are frequently employed in so-called 3D-jobs: they perform dirty, difficult and dangerous tasks regardless of their training and previous work experience.

<3>Still, as Joanna Rydzewska argues, the allure of the West, for which London metonymically stands, roams highly in the Polish collective imagination (128). This longing for the West and the attraction of the British capital is also commented on by Ewa Mazierska in her discussion of a 2006 Polish film about young Poles' decision to go abroad. She stresses that for the protagonists

London functions as a myth [...], not unlike 'America's' mythological status for their parents and grandparents [sic] generations. However, the stuff of this new myth is quite different; London does not promise the characters material wealth, but rather 'wealth of experience': life in the centre of things, which is faster and unpredictable, unlike the monotonous existence in [...] Poland. (120-121)

The lure of London also becomes apparent in the adaptation of The Clash's 'London Calling' (1987) by the Polish band Radio Bagdad. The chorus of their song 'Londyn Dzwoni' (2007) reads: 'If you have a lot of dreams or lack a plan for life / Then London attracts you like a magnet attracts iron.' According to the lyrics, this attraction persists despite the 'sweat and tears' that frequently await the Polish newcomers.

<4>Unsurprisingly, besides film and music, the sudden and significant wave of Polish migration has also given rise to a number of literary texts in which a Polish experience of life in the UK is described and reflected. As the ensuing overview of Polish London literature intends to demonstrate, the British capital serves as a privileged focal point, thus showing the city's actual, but also imaginative, importance for Polish migrants. [2] What is more, most texts envisage London as an ambiguous city, signifying promise and bliss on the one hand, and struggle or potential failure on the other.

<5>This ambivalent attitude towards the urban is neither historically new nor specifically Polish. As, for example, Wojciech Lizęga demonstrates in his study with the telling title *Jerusalem and Babylon. Cities of Émigré Poets (Jerozolima i Babilon. Miasta poetów emigracyjnych)* (1998), post-war Polish poets resorted to the biblical contrast between the promised and the fallen city to render their experience of forced exile. The polarity of Babylon and the Golden City similarly permeates many British fictions of migration penned by members of the Windrush generation and their descendants (Cuevas). The parallel is not surprising if we take into consideration Roy Sommer's definition of *Fictions of Migration* as narratives which bring into view migration as both spatial movement and cultural oscillation (6). Intercultural narratives by Polish writers who deal with migratory movements thus generally raise concerns comparable to authors from Britain's former colonies.

<6>Saskia Sassen claims that besides New York and Tokyo, London is one of three leading global cities and that the metropolis's social space represents the world through its immigrant population. Consequently, metropolitan life cannot be fathomed without the experience of migrants. Towards the second millennium, London has definitely

developed into a transnational node of contact (Ball, *Imagining* 5). At the same time, postcolonial, Black and Asian British as well as transnational London literature has become the focus of an array of studies. Some critics contend, however, that concentrating on a discursive continuity of London as a (post)imperial space denies other 'New Londoners' a similarly marginal position within the metropolis (Phillips 106). Although – in contrast to East European migrants – race and colour are particularly relevant for the Windrush generation, West Indians, for example, count as the best-assimilated immigrants due to their religious background and English mother tongue (Cuevas 65). Conversely, the often scarce knowledge of the language and the predominantly Catholic faith of the Polish migrants may be read as markers of their subaltern position, despite their 'whiteness'. [3] Notwithstanding such differences, however, the themes of 'traditional' fictions of migration – such as alienation and belonging, the reshaping of individual and national identities, the representation of urban space and city tropes – can be used to analyse London literature by Polish migrants.

<7>This is why our survey of Polish London literature is preceded by some brief excursions into two antecedent literary contexts: firstly, into post-war fictions of migration by Black and Asian British authors, and secondly, into Polish 'pre-EU' responses to London. With such contextualisation we do not wish to make the point that contemporary Polish migrant writers consciously reproduce city tropes developed by earlier generations of authors, thus deliberately taking up an intertextual dialogue. In fact, this seems rather unlikely, albeit not impossible, because the texts discussed in the following do not form part of an established, artistic or 'high-brow' literature, but rather belong to a niche, created for the most part by literary newcomers or amateur writers. Given the considerable historical or ethnic differences, we also do not place the movement of Poles in an enlarged European Union on an equal footing with earlier forms of migration. What we do believe, however, is that reading these contemporary Polish texts alongside earlier fictions of migration yields a significant, repeated surfacing of common tropes. One must be careful about abstracting general principles from such a limited selection of texts and beware of ignoring particular culture- and time-specific idiosyncrasies; still, the commonalities are too conspicuous to be ignored. In fact, they suggest that the tension between destruction and rebirth seems to constitute a generic element of experiencing and representing both urbanity and migration. It is thus the aim of this paper to demonstrate and to contextualise how contemporary Polish migrant writers depict London as hovering between the extremes of 'rubble' and 'resurrection'.

Context I: Post-War Fictions of Migration by Black and Asian British Authors

<8>The city has always constituted a 'zone of attraction' (Rossiaud 145) as it unleashes an array of desires and woos immigrants with manifold opportunities: economic independence, cultural engagement, social betterment, personal emancipation and so on. At the same time, through their presence, migrants themselves reterritorialise, refashion and reinvent the city in a vibrant way, for example by writing the metropolis (Ball, *Imagining* 9-11). John Clement Ball draws attention to the challenges inherent to this process: 'Many who travel to London perceive it as a place of struggle against overwhelming obstacles: marginalization, segregation, and solitude; an alien climate and built environment; racism, poverty, and cultural conflict' (6). Consequently, a diverse body of writers with links to the West Indies, Africa, South Asia, Canada and Australia have revisioned post-war London in tales of struggle, disappointment and violence, but also of vitality, achievement, creation and hybridity (McLeod, *Postcolonial* 4).

<9>Indeed, postcolonial, Black and Asian British or transnational urban fiction adheres to a long-standing tradition of representing the city along the antithetical lines of the idealised, heavenly New Jerusalem on the one hand, and the depraved, corrupt Babylon on the other (Ball, *Imagining* 20; Cuevas 35). The trope emphasises that cities are praised and decried, depending on whether their inhabitants are seen to live in the centre of civilisation or the hub of moral poisoning (Rossiaud 139-140). This standardised dichotomy is particularly suitable for representing urban-generic ambivalences of the metropolis, such as city and country, public and private, sociability and anomie, heterogeneity and homogeneity, familiarity and strangeness, community and individualism, indifference and involvement, apathy and vigilance (Pleske 120-121).

<10>Carl Schorske and Raymond Williams have shown that the verdict on the city is transmutable throughout the ages and largely dependent on the prevalent stance of either pro- or anti-urbanites. The pro-urban tradition stresses the cultural refinement of the city as a centre of civilisation wrought by bourgeois industry, commercial exchange, pride and wealth. The metropolis is depicted as an alluring place of light, learning, culture, power, splendour, visual spectacle, etc. (Cuevas 41-43). The anti-urban or pastoralist tradition, by contrast, casts the city as a jungle, voracious giant, machine or whore. The Babylonian metaphor stresses the heterogeneity of city life, where all kinds of people meet and mingle, yet never entirely understand one another, which leads to non-communication and confusion. As a dangerous place of social chaos, the city is moreover inhabited by specific pariahs – prostitutes, criminals, homeless people, immigrants (Pleske 202) – who epitomise the consequences of urban life for the uprooted, displaced and excluded: deprivation, decline, disease, contamination, corruption, crime.

<11>Schorske identifies a third conceptualisation of the city, which transcends the dichotomy of virtue or vice, namely that of the city beyond good and evil. For Cuevas, this third tradition – related to Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque – encompasses elements of subversion and play (43). She argues that the heterogeneous street-crowd, for instance, triggers bewilderment and disorientation, but that these reactions are not negatively connoted (44). Instead, the variety of city life induces fascination, the display of humanity leads to tolerance, the levelling of social hierarchies is seen as a liberation from norms, and the endorsement in social oddities represents the comprehensiveness of life (43-45). These equivocal appraisals of the city can be related to third-space perspectives engrained in Michel Foucault's notion of the heterotopia or Homi Bhabha's liminal space of hybridity.

<12>Looking at concrete examples of city tropes in the postcolonial London novel of migration, critics have similarly distinguished a transformation from rather bleak experiences in the 1950s and 1960s to the new flamboyant energies of the millennial metropolis. With the open door policy of the Nationality Act – which we might compare to the unobstructed labour migration for new EU members adopted by the UK in 2004 – 250,000 Caribbeans entered the UK between 1948 and 1962. Early West Indian writers like George Lamming, V. S. Naipaul and Samuel Selvon capture the various shocks of alienation. In contrast to the former two, who offer an exclusively gloomy picture of immigrant life, Selvon's classical novel of migration, *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), not only charts the disenchantment and despair of its characters, but also drafts their pleasures and exuberance (Ball, *Imagining* 110-111; McLeod, *Postcolonial* 34, 190;

Nasta xiv). Echoing the trope of New Jerusalem and Babylon, the novel equally celebrates and criticises the city (Ball, *Imagining* 23, 140), representing London as 'both magnet and nightmare' (Nasta v), as hovering between 'gold and grey' (McLeod, *Postcolonial* 34).

<13>In its carnivalesque quality, Selvon's novel can be seen as a precursor of Zadie Smith's subsequent lively depiction of multicultural London (Nasta vii). Smith's upbeat and humorous vision of the metropolis in *White Teeth* (2000) is paradigmatic of a new concept of London whose 'representations share [...] a cheerful optimism about the future of the metropolis, and [...] the possibilities it offers to inscribe new voices and histories into the urban fabric' (Groes 261). These 'polycultural and multiracial visions of London's problems and possibilities' (McLeod, 'Writing' 244) are overwhelmingly pro-urban in the sense that they stress London as a 'site of transformative social and cultural encounter for all' (244). For McLeod, this optimistic take on the city constitutes a major trend in contemporary urban fiction. Conversely, novels such as Monica Ali's tale of advancement *Brick Lane* (2003) exemplify that recent fictions of migration also deliver an insight into the socially deprived and oppressed lives of London's East End immigrant community. McLeod claims that representing the '[u]nseen lives' (249) of East London's illegal workers, asylum seekers, undocumented refugees, menial labourers, etc. – that is, immigrants who are largely pushed to the margins by official views of the vibrant global city – constitutes another significant trend in twenty-first-century London writing. As we shall see in the following, both trends noted by McLeod are detectable in several city narratives penned by Polish migrants to the UK.

Context II: Responses to London in Earlier Texts by Polish Migrants

<14>Interestingly, the darker images in postcolonial urban literature often build on intertextual references to Joseph Conrad's depiction of London. As one of the great British writers of the twentieth century, Conrad is probably the most notorious Polish Briton of all. He was born Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski near Berdichev, in a predominantly Polish part of the Russian Empire. As a victim of Russian imperialism and its political ethos, Conrad's background was not unlike that of colonised people. At the age of twenty-one, without any command of English, he joined the British Merchant Marine and in 1886 became a British subject. Throughout his career at sea, Conrad himself became involved in various imperial endeavours, such as the Congo Free State – an experience which became the basis for *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Importantly, the text's persistent trope of 'the heart of an immense darkness' (187) does not primarily refer to 'Darkest Africa', but to the very centre of the Empire itself: instead of epitomising civilisation and serving as a source of light, London is depicted as a place of brooding and mournful gloom (103). [4]

<15>Similarly, in Conrad's London novel *The Secret Agent* (1907), the metropolis is represented as a dark place haunted by anomie, anarchism, terrorism, delinquency, atavism and degeneracy. In the 'Author's Note', he comments that the feel of London pervading the narrative largely derives from his memories of 'solitary and nocturnal walks' (231) around the metropolis in the 1880s and 1890s – his early years as a Polish emigrant. Conrad specifically mentions his first impressions of London:

The vision of an enormous town presented itself, of a monstrous town more populous than some continents and in its man-made might as if indifferent to heaven's frowns

and smiles; a cruel devourer of the world's light. There was room enough there to place any story, depth enough there for any passion, variety enough there for any setting, darkness enough to bury five millions of lives. (231)

The Secret Agent is infused with a strong imagery of this monstrosity, indifference and darkness. Firstly, London is cast as an 'enormity of cold, black, wet, muddy, inhospitable accumulation of bricks, slates, and stones, things in themselves unlovely and unfriendly to man' (42), while its 'unfeeling stones' (201) strike just as unwelcoming as its moribund and decaying houses (61). Secondly, in a parallel to *Heart of Darkness*, London emerges as a 'sullen, brooding, and sinister' jungle (111). The novel's negative water imagery of mist, mud, grime and dampness (20, 59, 74, 108) turns London into a 'slimy morass' (Cuevas 46), whose inhabitants live in fear of being variously suffocated or drowned (Conrad, *Secret Agent* 110, 197). The city's claustrophobic atmosphere and loneliness eventually drive urbanites into 'madness and despair' (227).

<16>The tale's protagonists, the Verlocs, are caught in their 'domestic drama' of institutionalised prostitution, deceit, and murder (163). The cast of Eastern European anarchists, Michaelis, Karl Yundt and Comrade Ossipon, adds to the impression of urban deviance (81). People are either characterised as degenerate fools, unfeeling automata or ticking time bombs (144), and the sheer extent of the London crowd condemns the individual to insignificance (60, 71). Particularly Ossipon's circuitous night walk through 'monotonous streets with unknown names where the dust of humanity settles inert and hopeless out of the stream of life' (220) implies that the 'city is an alien, restless place where no one is at home' (Lyon xxvi).

<17>Yet despite its 'hopeless colouring', the narrative nevertheless captures the city's 'secret ardour' (Conrad, 'Author's' 231). An optimistic outlook is, for example, emphasised through the positive employment of the aqueous metaphor. With regard to sea images in postcolonial London writing, Ball argues that water defines the transnational metropolis in connection to other places: 'Cities have always been places of mixture, of the commingling of differences across the borders that otherwise separate people into cultures, races, ethnicities, classes, religions, generations, and nations' ('Immigration' 223). In Conrad's novel, a comparable urban experience is made by the Assistant Commissioner during one of his disguised explorations through London, when he transforms himself into a 'queer foreign fish' (*Secret Agent* 109) 'diving' into the stream of London's immigrant population. In an Italian restaurant in Soho, he notices that people are somewhat 'denationalised' (109), which lends London's cosmopolis a certain egalitarian tint where nobody is 'personally stamped in any way, professionally, socially or racially' (109). Here the novel's dynamic water metaphor evokes a creative disorder that is part of the city's vitality, allowing the individual to shed an old and adopt a new identity.

<18>A pronounced leaning towards a more negative view of London is detectable in the writing of Stanisław Mackiewicz (1896-1966) – a Polish conservative politician, journalist and historian who lived in London between 1940 and 1956 as one among many Polish exiles who had come to the UK in the wake of the Second World War. After his return to Poland in 1956, Mackiewicz composed a series of essays, which were first published in the Polish weekly *Przegląd Kulturalny* and then in 1957 as a book entitled *Londyniszczce*. The short texts contain Mackiewicz's personal impressions of England as well as his

comments on the Anglo-Polish relationship. They all read like a story of unrequited love, for which the first essay already sets the tone:

I lived in England for almost seventeen years. I had arrived by plane from Portugal on 8 September 1940. [...] I had come to England, which was still fighting, from France, which had laid down its arms. My attitude towards the English was similar to that of other Poles, i.e. it was virtually enthusiastic. [...] I was delighted in all those English traits which were later to irritate and annoy me so much. [...] After the war, the [English] sympathies towards us melted as quickly as snow in spring. [...] Year after year went by and my antipathy towards the English grew. And not only mine. With each year, Polish people in England become more and more Anglophobic. [...] One can certainly say that the longer a Pole stays in England, the less he likes the English people and the worse he feels living there. (5-9)

The reasons behind Mackiewicz's attitude are manifold. Not only does he bemoan that Polish migrants living in the UK are looked down upon by their hosts; he is first and foremost disaffected by the stance the British government took towards Poland during and after the Second World War. This policy is to Mackiewicz a reflection of a general mental disposition, which he perceives as typically British: he criticises Britain for its selfish and cowardly (although effective) pragmatism, which he repeatedly opposes to the Poles' heroic and romantic (although largely futile) behaviour.

<19>The profound disenchantment permeating Mackiewicz's observations directly translates into his disapproval of London's monstrous cityscape:

London is the ugliest city in the world. An atrocious bastardisation of all styles and of the most garish and tasteless architectural pretensions. There hovers above the old parts – which of course are the prettiest, because they at least convey something like a unified character – the memory of smoke, pitch, dirt and an *ennui* heavier than lead. The newer parts of town are dominated by vulgar imagination, by aesthetic boorishness. [...] A symbol of the Londoners' taste is provided by the monstrosity of the statue of Albert, Queen Victoria's spouse. Each detail of this statue owns to a different style, ranging from the times of ancient Egypt or Babylon to modernist secession. (46)

In the context of Mackiewicz's repulsed reflections, his mentioning of Babylon seems symptomatic and, if we follow Lizęga, comparable to other 'anti-urban works of Polish emigrants, in which Babylon – the city of sin, evil, and the fall of man – is epitomised by London' (133). Many Polish émigré poets, writes Lizęga, associate the heavenly city of Jerusalem with their lost Polish hometowns, while perceiving the cities of exile in Babylonian terms (21). Mackiewicz's aesthetic disdain for the British capital reads like an echo of the unfulfilled expectations both on a personal and on a larger, socio-political scale. The feeling of disappointment is rendered even more acute through the constant evocation of the initial enthusiasm the author felt for England. He stresses, for instance, that his pen name 'Cat' – which he had chosen before his exile in London and under which he is known in Poland until today (as Stanisław Cat-Mackiewicz) – was originally inspired by Rudyard Kipling's writing (Mackiewicz 110). Mackiewicz had thus constructed a part of his identity within a distinctly Anglophile context, which makes his eventual disappointment all the more painful.

London's Ambivalence in Recent Texts by Polish Migrants

<20>It could be argued that in view of the specific historical circumstances, Conrad and Mackiewicz's experiences as exiles can hardly be related to that of 'new' Polish labour migrants who came to Britain more or less voluntarily in the wake of Poland's accession to the European Union. Nevertheless, as the subsequent examples illustrate, contemporary Polish migrant literature constructs London along similar antithetical lines as those underlying Conrad's urban fictions and Mackiewicz's non-fictional essays in *Londyniszczce*.

<21>An optimistic image of London infuses Grzegorz Kopaczewski's novel *Global Nation. Pics from the Era of Pop Culture (Global Nation. Obrazki z czasów popkultury)* (2004), one of the first literary responses to contemporary Polish migration to Britain. In contrast to later texts on Polish migration, *Global Nation* is apparently set shortly before the massive Polish influx to the UK. It consequently places its protagonist's experiences within a deliberately transnational context, putting his hopes and difficulties on an equal footing with those of young migrants from other, notably Western, countries. The title of the novel implies that London is a tangibly multicultural and postmodern metropolis, aptly epitomised by the flat, which the protagonist Daniel Berski shares with young people from all over the (Western) world. Already the first paragraph of *Global Nation* draws on the topos of London as lively, exciting and ahead of its times:

Current job... current boss... current friends... current girlfriend... current flat... current flatmates... current bed... current tv set... current toaster... Have you ever thought about your wireless electric kettle in terms of the current kettle only? Some people say: 'my last job', 'my last boyfriend', 'my last video player', but lastingness is the last thing that comes to mind in London. (7)

Arguably, this notion of London is not one that Daniel has developed during his stay in the British metropolis, but one which he already sustained before his arrival. *Global Nation* suggests that London is an exceptional city, because it is even 'known' to those who have never seen it with their own eyes. This knowledge is, at least partially, derived from other 'texts', as Daniel's memories of his first days in Britain's capital, spent at an international backpackers' hostel, make apparent:

It is not true that London begins in Heathrow, Gatwick, Luton, Stansted, Victoria Station or Waterloo. For most of us, London began in Bayswater. First impression after getting out of the tube at Queensway: 'Hm, it looks different than in those films with Hugh Grant. Or in music videos. Or even in Mike Leigh.' (15)

Daniel's initial disappointment articulated here is thus not grounded in a disparity between actual London and its specifically Polish imagined counterpart (as is the case in Mackiewicz's essays), but on a discrepancy between the real city and its Western cultural representations. *Global Nation* even seems to suggest that US-American cultural texts and products might be more effective in grasping a city that is marked not by its Britishness, but by its status as a global metropolis: 'This whole London life of ours', Daniel concludes, 'is more reminiscent of *The Simpsons* than of *Eastenders*.' (15)

<22>In contrast to Conrad and Mackiewicz, but similar to post-war immigrants from the Caribbeans, in *Global Nation* the foreign newcomer creatively territorialises the city. Equipped with 'global' cultural knowledge – Daniel peppers his narrative with the names

of international musicians, TV programmes and brands – the Polish migrant soon appropriates the bustling, multicultural city and skilfully navigates through its intricate topography, as his frequent references to public transportation show: 'Maria usually takes the Piccadilly Line from Arsenal to King's Cross and then the Northern Line to Archway. If I was her, I'd take the 4; Chris takes the 4 or 19 to Highbury Corner, then 43 or 271 to Holloway/Camden Road' (29). The recurrence of such itineraries emphasises Daniel's purposeful and controlled movement through London and thus through global culture for which the British capital metonymically stands. In her analysis of the Polish TV series *Londyńczycy* (2008-2010), Rydzewska detects a similar 'infatuation with London, which projects the mythical presence of the West in the Polish imagination' (131). In other words: the metropolis serves as a metonym for the West. [5] It thus comes as no surprise that eventually in *Global Nation* London proves to be just a stepping stone to the protagonist's further transcultural experience: the second half of the novel follows Daniel on his journey to New Zealand. In other contemporary urban fictions of migration set in the early 1950s, London serves as a similar node of transit(ion) of the global(ised) migrant. [6]

<23>A number of texts from an anthology published four years after *Global Nation* draw a less optimistic picture. *Written at the Edge of the World. A Self-Portrait of Contemporary Polish Emigration (Na końcu świata napisane. Autoportret współczesnej polskiej emigracji)* (2008) is the result of a literary competition initiated by the (no longer operating) London-based online bookseller Polish Books UK. Polish migrants were asked to send in literary responses to their experience of migration, from which a jury selected and published the best pieces. Many of the awarded contributions are set in London – a city by then clearly marked by the massive influx of Polish and other East European labour migrants.

<24>This influx makes a difference: while *Global Nation's* Daniel Berski identifies himself with a temporarily underprivileged, yet transnational and internally non-hierarchical group of foreigners from all over the world, many first-person narrators of the short stories in *Written at the Edge of the World* see themselves as exploited and marginalised underdogs who may not even trust their own compatriots. *Global Nation's* multicultural group of young adventure seekers has given way to a purely Eastern European community where friendships are formed on a provisional basis and tainted by a cost-and-benefit rationale. The male narrator of Jakub Bolec's short story 'Resurrection of a Binman' ('Zmartwychwstanie śmieciarza') deems this quasi-Hobbesian state of perpetual competition characteristic of Polish life in London: 'You're like a fag thrown away by the hand of fate, swirling with a tide of people and machines through the arteries of the metropolis [...]. If you're out of luck or connections or are not shrewd enough, you go down' (71-2). The fate of another Polish migrant who 'goes down' is presented in Marek Jakubowski's story with the punning title 'Hard Loding' ('Twarde londowanie'): fellow Poles cheat him out of his money and leave him behind with virtually nothing. 'After a few days of milling around London, sleeping in parks, getting drunk on cheap cider' (199), he returns to Poland as one of those who have been beaten by the ruthless rules of the city.

<25>A young Polish man, torn between fascination with multicultural and lively London on the one hand and his disappointment that he cannot make a successful career there on the other, is at the centre of Daniel Koziarski's *Sociopath in London (Socjopata w Londynie)* (2007). The novel begins with the unruly narrator's avowal that he is fed up

with his job at a fish-and-chips shop in Ealing, it follows him through a two-year-long series of London adventures, and it finishes with his decision to return to Poland. The last chapter contains Tomasz Płachta's final impressions of the city, in whose topography he inscribes his own migrant experience:

My journey on the 38 [...] passed by so many interesting places in London that retrospection was as evident as unavoidable. [...] Angel Islington with the magic of Upper Street and my memories of the Polish church on Devonian Road; then Holborn, in the direct vicinity of which were my most important places of work; Tottenham Court Road with the statue of Freddy Mercury which to tourists was a much bigger attraction than the rocketed skyscraper of Centre Point, and with a view to Oxford Street which I had walked up and down hundreds of times in search of various music records; West End with the crowded Piccadilly Circus illuminated by advertisements; Hyde Park, and then finally my destination, Victoria Station, where everything began, and where everything was to end. (284)

Sitting in the coach that is about to bear him home, Tomasz realises 'how great a failure my stay in London has turned out to be. What is worse, I realised the pointless vacuum of my present life as I was leaving England with nothing and returning to Poland – to virtually nothing' (285).

<26>In a sense, this experience echoes the downward social mobility of the Windrush generation, but it still carries the hope for an unexpected twist of fate. The endings of the two above-mentioned Polish texts suggest that the image of London underlying them is not wholly negative. The narrator of 'Hard Landing' looks at the neat English terraced houses from the homebound bus with a last thought on his mind: 'I will buy such a house one day' (Jakubowski 199). Tomasz Płachta, the eponymous sociopath from Koziarski's novel, disembarks from the coach at the last minute when he is informed that a screenplay he had written with a friend has been accepted by a British TV channel. The last words of his narrative are: '[N]ews of my death proved premature' (Koziarski 287). Therefore, although the two texts end with strikingly similar scenes – male protagonists sitting in a coach to Poland and musing over their failure – they are suffused with stubbornness and the hopeful anticipation of better times.

<27>'The Promised Island' ('Wyspa obiecana') in Jacek Ozaist's London story proves comparably equivocal. Here, we are confronted with a narrator who, despite his knowledge of two foreign languages, despite holding two university degrees and despite years spent at academic institutions, is unable to find employment in Poland. He therefore reluctantly departs for the British Isles where his initial reaction to London is a mixture of awe and nonchalance:

I don't know London and he [i.e. London] doesn't know me. We both don't need that. I am too small for him, and he's too gigantic for me. He's been here forever, I've been here for just a few hours. There's no way that he'll adapt to me – I have to respect his will. So, Master, give me a lesson in life. Give me a kick in the arse or hold me to your heart. (26)

The 'lesson' of the 'Master' turns out to be ambivalent, as Ozaist's story remains suspended between failure and success. The narrator ends up in a squat where he occupies a derelict, ill-smelling room overlooking a trash heap. This is a clear parallel to

the dustman-status made explicit in Bolec's text, which in Ozaist's story is further emphasised by the protagonist reading Robert McLiam Wilson's *Ripley Bogle* (1989), the story of a homeless man in London (43). Yet on the other hand, the narrator's fellow squatters, who have furnished their rooms smartly with items discarded by affluent Londoners (42-3), demonstrate how a new, comfortable existence may be forged from the surrounding rubble.

<28>The protagonist likewise seems to accept his trashy London life as a necessary step towards what he hopes will be a better future. Disenchanted by the nepotism that prevented him from leading a decent life in Poland, he clings to the hope that in Britain his qualifications might prove of some use. Paradoxically, although his material and social position is clearly worse in London than it was in Poland, he keeps holding on to a meritocratic ideal: 'I will go to a Job Centre. They apparently have many job offers there. Current and concrete. Not like at home. At home, Mrs Krysia advertises for a job, although her brother-in-law already got it. It is different here. Believe me' (35). The story's open ending, however, does not divulge whether 'The Promised Island' will keep its promise. The text significantly breaks off with the protagonist lying in bed and turning his face to the wall, which might be read as symbolising the plethora of seemingly insurmountable difficulties that he still has to face. Again, this echoes the migrants' experience in the 1950s as commented on by Phillips: 'London is far from the Promised Land [...]. The city is cold, fog bound and unwelcoming' (115).

<29>Aleksander Kropiwnicki, former employee of the Polish embassy in London, claims to have had unhappy migrant stories in mind when he wrote *London Station (Zajezdnia Londyn)* (2007). Consisting of seven fictitious portraits of Polish migrants living in Britain's capital, the book sounds a cautionary note and palpably aims at tempering the expectations potential Polish migrants might have regarding London. There is no room for success stories: a sham job agency betrays a young woman who is then exploited and raped upon her arrival on British soil; a bus driver longs for his daughter while being exposed to insults from British passengers; a middle-aged woman experiences utter misery and loneliness which she only endures to provide for her family in Poland. Another character is the young and uneducated Roman who, armed with a beer can, grumbles about London's Victoria Station:

There are a lot of us milling around at this station. I was milling around here, too. And elsewhere. Around London, get it? London's a fucking shithole. They say that here they're hiring people everywhere. Well I don't know, I've been looking for work, and work's been looking for me, but somehow we didn't find each other. (91)

<30>Incidentally, Victoria Coach Station is a crucial topos (in both a geographic and a literary sense) in Polish London narratives. In early post-war fictions of migration, Waterloo Station served as a similar in-between space for stories of arrival and departure (Ball, *Imagining* 133). Often it was the starting point of an urban 'rite of passage' based on the belief that the city with its enhanced mobility offers a greater freedom to the individual to follow his or her chosen path. Even though, in Polish texts, Victoria is a place where the coaches from Poland arrive, it does not connote hope and the promise of a new beginning, but rather potential failure. It seems as if being forced to return to Victoria one day constitutes a possibility that preoccupies and alarms fictional Polish migrants. This becomes obvious from Roman's situation described above as well as from Tomasz Płachta's defeatist description of Victoria as the place 'where

everything began, and where everything was to end' (Koziarski 284). The narrator of Ozaist's 'The Promised Island' similarly declares upon reaching Victoria: 'I know the sad destinies connected with this station from television and the press, and so I'm moving along with the crowd with a heavy heart' (25). The title of Aleksander Kropiwnicki's book, *London Station*, proves significant in this regard: in his and other texts, one's success in London is partially measured by one's ability to decide freely whether and how one leaves it. Being forced to quit London or, conversely, not being able to leave because one cannot afford it, become two markers of 'failure'. [7]

<31>To prevent Polish migrants from being locked in or expelled from this metaphorical 'station', Kropiwnicki has added an appendix to his book entitled 'Friendly London, or How to Tame It', containing practical information on the city. He begins this manual on taming the urban monster with the comment:

The reader has certainly noticed that several of the protagonists of the stories included here made some grave mistake or other when they crossed the Channel. Some of them paid dearly for it. Before leaving for London, one needs to make the necessary preparations in order to avoid the sort of experiences Patrycja and Roman went through. (123)

In *London Station*, then, the British capital is portrayed as the locus of overstretched expectations and potential miscarriages whose effects the book tries to mitigate through means which, it must be noted, appear somewhat patronising and anachronistic.

<32>To round off the analysis and to offset the focus on male authors and narrators, it is instructive to take a final look at two short stories written by Polish women migrants and published in the above-mentioned collection *Written at the Edge of the World*. It is impossible to deduce general, gender-specific trends on the basis of just two texts. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that in these two short stories at least, London is represented more favourably than in texts by male Polish authors. [8] Similar to the paradigmatic novels of emancipation *In the Ditch* (1972) and *Second-Class Citizen* (1976) by Buchi Emecheta or the more recent female success story in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* – whose female characters fight their way from the bleakness of social isolation and become confident Londoners – female urban fictions of migration cast the metropolis as promising greater independence and individual freedom (Groes 236; Plesske 478-484; Sommer 108). With regard to women from Poland, Rydzewska argues that 'the space of London and the experience of migration gives them the opportunity to transgress cultural models of femininity based in Poland on the hegemony of traditional, patriarchal and Catholic norms' (137) and that it contests stereotypical inscriptions of Eastern women in discourses of prostitution.

<33>Katarzyna Latała's 'In the Land of Windy Showers' ('W Krainie Wietrznych Deszczowców') has a female narrator declare: 'And so here I am! Not for the money, not for the outlook, but just like that, to live here. I've been trying to get used to London for several years. I even start to like him [i.e. London] a bit. But don't tell him' (10). The personification of London – which is partially owing to the fact that in Polish, London's genus is male – hints at the heroine's intimate, maybe even slightly flirtatious, relationship with the city. This is interesting insofar as traditional depictions of the city tend to cast London as Babylonian whore or *femme fatale* who seduces the male and brings about the fall of female migrants. In Latała's text, this constellation is subverted:

the protagonist's time in London is associated with a positive, life-changing challenge. The story's ending makes this abundantly clear: 'My first shower in London was – inspiring, London during the shower – incredible. From then on it became the Land of Windy Showers – new experiences, exciting incidents and ... extraordinary ideas, because everyone is creative, you just have to be thrown off balance' (20).

<34>In 'Lubber' ('Nieżguła'), Justyna Ocieba chooses London as the setting for a migrant version of Cinderella. Maria, the protagonist of her short narrative, arrives in London (notably at Victoria Station) from a small Polish village in the hope of finding employment and being able to pay off her debts. Yet because of her clumsiness, she loses one job after another, so that in the end she is even forced to steal food from her Polish housemates.

Maria felt that God had left her. [...] that there was no work in London. She can't speak the language, she is 56 years old, she is an invalid without entitlement to a pension, she does not even have a mobile phone. She is no good at anything, except feeding chickens and pigs. (229)

It is at this low point that the story takes a fairy-like turn as Maria, lost in her depressing thoughts as well as on London's tube, unexpectedly encounters 'prince Al-Lucia, the famous clairvoyant, hypnotiser and medium' (229). This encounter gives her life a new spin because Al-Lucia discovers Maria's hitherto unknown spiritual talents. The narrative leaves unmentioned to what uses the Polish migrant puts her newly found faculties, but the last paragraph emphasises Maria's (financial) success by listing her black convertible, British pounds she sends to Poland by money transfer and three bags full of food bought at the Polish deli 'Zosia'. The narrator confidently sums up Maria's transformation: 'She was doing fine in London' (230).

<35>Ocieba pursues her story beyond the point where some of the texts mentioned earlier break off. Here, the anticipation of a better life in London despite evident obstacles is not just tentatively implied, but – even if somewhat magically – fully realised. Detectable behind Ocieba's *deus-ex-Tube* conclusion is the hope that, while living in London, an earlier identity (in this case that of a lame and old peasant woman) may be discarded in favour of a new and better one, as hitherto undiscovered abilities come to light. Two additional aspects are significant regarding Maria's successful transformation. Firstly, it is brought about through direct interaction with the cultural Other, in this case an apparently 'Oriental' clairvoyant. While having a palpably orientalisating ring to it, this encounter nevertheless suggests that opening up to the cultural diversity of London's inhabitants can be an enriching experience for the Polish migrant. Secondly, the fact that the means of effecting Maria's identity change appear on the Tube offers an interesting parallel to postcolonial London fiction. As Pleske argues in *The Intelligible Metropolis*, it has become a paradigmatic trope in these novels that the female immigrant travels on the Tube to the city centre, becomes temporarily lost in the Underground's passageways, recognises the Self and ascends to aboveground London with a sense of stabilised identity (451). [9]

<36>A comparable transformation – albeit taking place above ground – is also hinted at in Jacek Ozaist's 'The Promised Island', in which the protagonist's walk through London becomes concomitant with the shedding of his old identity:

I'm walking. Everything around me twitches and pulsates. [...] With each step, my walk divests me of the remainders of my manners and habits. Slowly I become a person independent of tradition, ethos, of inhibitions and reactions that are normal in one's country of origin, but insignificant outside of it. (26)

As in Conrad's early vision of the monstrous town, the possibility of reinventing oneself through a walk among the urban crowd has a positive touch to it. Losing oneself in the labyrinth of London's streets and walking oneself out of existence in the metropolis, the migrant *flâneur* appropriates and inscribes the cityscape (Ball, *Imagining* 135-140; Cuevas 45; Plesske 205).

Conclusion

<37>The overview of Polish London literature conducted here reveals a markedly ambivalent attitude towards the British capital, which is also characteristic of earlier fictions of migration. On the one hand, the texts in question envisage the city as a tough and merciless place that requires constant vigilance. Similar to London-based postwar narratives, the failure of predominantly male immigrants in the city must be read as a warning against its exaggerated mythicisation (Groes 249). In London, these texts imply, Polish migrants are relegated to the nether ranks of society; they are forced to live in squats, eat bad food, drink cheap alcohol and perform unpleasant menial tasks. 'Tainted' by their Eastern European provenance, Poles, in contrast to other (white and Western) Europeans, find themselves debased to a 'second class' status, as Radio Bagdad affirm in their song 'Londyn Dzwoni' (2007). The new urban pariah is thus the underpaid labour migrant who feels cut off from the world he or she was actually hoping to become part of in the metropolis (Ball, *Imagining* 27).

<38>On the other hand, the literary London emerging from these texts acquires an almost mythical status and epitomises something like a 'British Dream' of meritocracy, thrill and self-fulfilment (Rostek). It also functions as a global city, providing a challenging, yet potentially enriching alternative to the culturally more homogeneous Polish society. This ambivalence regarding London is epitomised in the title of the above-mentioned story by Jakub Bolec, 'Resurrection of a Binman': the Polish migrant is a dustman and thus dwells among the lowest social strata, but London grants him a resurrection, that is, the beginning of a new life. This paradox of destruction versus reconstruction calls to mind the trope of the city as a phoenix and a place of constant becoming (Plesske 10-11).

<39>Given this perpetual ambivalence, it is not surprising that London fictions of migration by Polish writers discussed here often focus on the migrants' identity crisis in relation to their new surroundings. They vary in the degree to which the crisis is resolved, but what they all seem to have in common is a conviction that the outcome is not predetermined from the outset. Sassen argues that the concentration of trade and immigrant communities in global cities has led to a 'new geography of centrality and marginality' (73). The texts analysed here suggest that Polish migrants initially find themselves in marginal positions, but they do not fully give up the hope that with time they will move towards the urban centre. One could argue that this reflects two different timespans inherent to the process of appropriating the city: the brief moment of 'painful apprenticeship' (Rossiaud 141) and the long-term phase of essential socialisation to the metropolis.

<40>Hence, although the negative aspects of metropolitan reality seem to prevail in post-2004 stories of Polish migration, the narratives for the most part do not preclude the possibility that, one day, the newcomers will find genuine fulfilment in the city. As in early urban fictions of migration, the authors oscillate in their verdict on the rich possibilities of urban life and the migrants' peripheral position (Sommer 107-108). They share this ambivalence with Polish post-war émigré poets, as described by Lizęga:

The point is not to create truthful representations of cities [...], but to describe oneself, to express one's existence in the language of places. [The point is to] register the pain of exile, not to hide the sorrow caused by the loss of one's own little homeland, but also: to open oneself to the wealth of new experiences, to appreciate the opportunity to rearrange one's personality. (26)

The challenge for Polish migrants today is thus similar to that faced by earlier London migrants: to find their place between the extremes of a destructive Babylon and a blissful Jerusalem – to forge a satisfying existence between rubble and resurrection.

Notes

[1] Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from German and Polish are ours. [[^](#)]

[2] For an analysis of novels about Dublin by Polish migrants, see Joanna Rostek's 'From a Polish in Dublin to Polish Dublin: Retracing Changing Migratory Patterns in Two Recent "Dublin Novels" by Polish Migrants'. [[^](#)]

[3] For a discussion of the subaltern position of Polish migrants in the UK, see Joanna Rostek and Dirk Uffelmann. [[^](#)]

[4] Echoes of this Conradian trope can be found in Naipaul's depiction of London in *An Area of Darkness* (1964) or in the pessimistic ending of Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (Phillips 107, 121; Sommer 107). [[^](#)]

[5] Rydzewska moreover posits that the characters in the series leave Poland specifically for the mythicised lure of London and not for the appeal of Britain (133). [[^](#)]

[6] As Nora Plesske has argued elsewhere, something similar occurs in V. S. Naipaul's *Half a Life* (2001) and J. M. Coetzee's *Youth* (2002). While the two protagonists try to re-invent themselves in 1950s/60s London, urban life is depicted as being transformed into an immigrant-inflicted cosmopolitan culture, against the background of historical events with postcolonial relevance. However, in both novels, postcolonial London does not figure as a place to make one's own, but merely as a place of transit, as a thoroughfare for the migrant diaspora: the metropolis features as the passage between home and further exile. [[^](#)]

[7] Similarly, in Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, Winnie Verloc leaves from Waterloo Station to commit suicide on a ferry to France. [[^](#)]

[8] That texts by Polish female migrant writers tend to be more conciliatory than those by male authors has also been observed by Dirk Uffelmann, who argues with regard to Polish fictions of migration that the narrators' tendency towards an at times aggressive 'self-Orientalisation is (up to now) a male rebellious gesture' (125). [[^](#)]

[9] The moving train's association with the fluidity of the individual Self even enhances this process (Sommer 52). Although the Tube represents a confined and enclosed public space, it is constructed as a liminal space in which cultural boundaries are transgressed, and a contact zone where difference is negotiated. Incidentally, this spatial arrangement reverses the dominant trope evoked by Polish émigré poets, as described by Lizęga. In their works, upward movement is associated with the heavenly Jerusalem, while going down and discovering the city's 'entrails' have Babylonian undertones (Lizęga 21). [[^](#)]

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