

ARTICLES AND TREATISES  
ARTYKUŁY I ROZPRAWY

PART I: GENERATION AND TRANSFORMATION IN WOMEN'S WRITING

**Generation, Transformation and Place in Inga  
Iwasiów's Novels *Bambino* (2008) and *Ku słońcu* (2010)**

Ursula PHILLIPS  
*London*

ABSTRACT

This chapter will discuss two novels by contemporary writer Inga Iwasiów (b. 1963), *Bambino* (2008) and *Ku słońcu* [Towards the Sun] (2010), in the context of geopolitical, ideological, social and psycho-cultural transformations as they specifically affect different generations of inhabitants of the Polish city of Szczecin (pre-1945 German Stettin) from 1945 until the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *Bambino* covers the years 1945–1981, but also contains flashbacks to pre-war memory of Stettin and to the suppressed experiences of the new post-war inhabitants, as well as 'flash-forwards' to post-1989, post-communist reality; *Ku słońcu* covers 1981 to the first decade of 2000s. It will show how the novels portray these transformations through the experience primarily of women (but not only) — in *Bambino*, through the main protagonists: Ula (formerly Ulrike), Anna and Marysia, and through that of the hidden narrator Magda (Marysia's daughter born in the same year as the author, Iwasiów, 1963); and in *Ku słońcu*, primarily through the experience of Magda herself, as well as through that of two generations of 'feminist' academics: Małgorzata and Sylwia (in which it is hard not to perceive the personal experience of the author, though she is at pains to emphasize elsewhere that her work is a collective biography of the city, not so much of herself). The analysis follows Katarzyna Chmielewska's supposition that contemporary Polish fiction dealing with the past 'constantly oscillates between memory and genealogy', and that it raises raw issues not yet addressed by historians; it also derives inspiration from the new 'postdependency' studies proposed by Hanna Gosk and Ryszard Nycz. It also attempts to capture the specific nature of Iwasiów's use of language, her style of feminism, her method of portraying place, and the connections in her prose between place and memory.

KEYWORDS

Polish women's writing, Inga Iwasiów, postdependency studies, generation, memory

[www.argument-journal.eu](http://www.argument-journal.eu)

During the past twenty or so years, since the fall of communism in 1989 and the subsequent fundamental changes to the political and economic systems of the former Soviet-bloc countries and their opening up to the West, various ways have emerged in Polish fiction, especially since 2000, of representing the communist past — from satire to nostalgia, all largely based however around two basic strategies: memory retrieval and generational (or ‘genealogical’) reconstruction. One might even suggest that fiction has pre-empted scholarly representations of people’s experience of the People’s Republic of Poland, perhaps as a result of fiction’s very nature as imprecise, subjective, ambiguous, and able to convey strong emotions, and subconscious or repressed experience in semi-articulated and suggestive ways. A similar point is made by Katarzyna Chmielewska when she argues that

The historical genealogy of the immediate past epoch is still non-existent either on the macro or micro scale. We still have to wait for the works of historians. We encounter traces of such a conception of this past, however, in our most recent literature. I have in mind the novels of Inga Iwasiów and Joanna Bator, published 2008–2010. I speak of ‘traces’ because this literature constantly oscillates between memory and genealogy (CHMIELEWSKA 2012: 22).<sup>1</sup>

My current analysis accepts Chmielewska’s diagnosis as its point of departure, but will concentrate on the two novels by Iwasiów, *Bambino* (2008) and *Ku słońcu* [Towards the Sun] (2010), focusing on generational transformation and location in a specific place, and also emphasizing some of the gendered aspects of the narratives.

Another inspiration for my reflections is the context of the ‘postdependency’ studies (‘studia postzależnościowe’ or ‘badania postzależnościowe’) that have been developed in Polish literary studies over the last four years as an attempt to quantify how change has been represented in literary works primarily. Since at the same time as it has experienced an opening-up to western influences and ideas, to western democratic practices, Polish society continues to deal with unresolved issues lingering from the communist past, which have not been adequately addressed either by politicians or academics, and hence continue to affect the present: questions of national identity (European or not?), issues surrounding former ‘traitors’ and ‘informers’ — of access to the Institute of National Memory (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, IPN) files and of ‘lustracja’, to name but two. In this respect Poland may be described as a ‘postcolonial’ society, emerging from being ‘colonized’ in the ideological sense by the Soviet system, which in

---

<sup>1</sup> All translations in this paper from Polish into English are done by Ursula Phillips unless otherwise is indicated.

the Polish public psyche is heavily overwritten by the legacy of 19<sup>th</sup>-century domination/colonization by Tsarist Russia. In this context, however, we should remember that in the more distant past Poland itself was a colonizing power, absorbing into its sphere of influence swathes of Ukrainian- and Belarusian-speaking populations, not to mention Germans, Balts and Jews; in the inter-war period too, 1919–1939, so-called national ‘minorities’ (a misnomer in the context) in the eastern borderlands, territories lost to the Soviet Union after World War II, were subject to Polish ‘colonization’, a fact often suppressed by ‘Kresy’ nostalgia (BAKUŁA 2007: 47–50). Meanwhile, traces of the former German past in areas ‘colonized’ by Polish communism, following the post-war treaties concluded between the great powers and the shifting of Poland’s borders to the west, find a number of echoes in Polish prose since 1990: in the work of Paweł Huelle, Stefan Chwin, Olga Tokarczuk, Joanna Bator, Ewa Kujawska, as well as in that of Inga Iwasiów.

In response to this highly complex intermeshing of greater openness and democratic change with unresolved and contentious ongoing issues, ‘postdependency’ studies have emerged out of western postcolonial theory to address the specific local nature of Polish problems and discourses. The leading scholars in the field are Ryszard Nycz and Hanna Gosk, respectively of the Department of Literary Anthropology and Cultural Research (Katedra Antropologii Literatury i Badań Kulturowych) of the Jagiellonian University, Kraków, and the Centre for Research on Postdependency Discourses (Centrum Badań Dyskursów Postzależnościowych) of Warsaw University. More recently, Ewa Kraskowka has involved the Interdisciplinary Centre for Research on Cultural Gender and Identity (Interdyscyplinarne Centrum Badań Płci Kulturowej i Tożsamości) of the Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, which brings in the important dimension of gender.<sup>2</sup>

Inga Iwasiów’s novels are set almost exclusively in a specific geographical or geopolitical location, namely the post-World War II Polish city of Szczecin, formerly the German ‘Stettin in the Baltic’, as Churchill once called it,<sup>3</sup> although the port city on the River Oder and Dąbie Lake lies at least a hundred kilometres from the sea. The *genius loci* is a constant, omnipresent and unifying structural element in the development

---

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the following key publications: GOSK 2010; NYCZ 2011, both based on earlier conferences. See also the material that has appeared since 2000 in *Teksty drugie*, in particular CAVANAGH 2003, and articles in 2003 (6), 2007 (4) and 2010 (5). Note also the conference about to take place in Poznań at the time of writing, entitled ‘Po zaborach, po wojnie, po PRL — polski dyskurs postzależnościowy dawniej i dziś’ (28–29 May 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Iron Curtain Speech, delivered in Fulton, Missouri 1946.

of the narratives. The novels focus on the everyday worlds of a group of individuals, mostly female but not exclusively, representing at least two generations of post-war Szczecin's inhabitants, seen against the background of the political, economic and social transformations that took place between 1945 and the first decade of the twenty-first century within the wider context of communist and then post-communist (post-1989) Poland, and indicating how the various transformations have affected the life aspirations, disappointments, tragedies, but also — sometimes — achievements of the fictional protagonists.

It would be misguided, however, to suggest that the novels simply reflect political and socio-economic transition, since — while acknowledging the inevitable influence of external ideological constraints upon the private world — the focus of the narrative in both novels is much more on the internal, emotional and existential experiences of individuals and their intimate relationships, on the private rather than the public, much of this experience (especially in *Bambino*) being portrayed negatively and associated with repressed memory and traumatized states of mind, akin to amnesia and melancholy. Much more is shown to be at stake than the effects of communism and post-communist transition. Perhaps the most drastic and egregious aspect of the communist past reveals itself to be its very suppression of any other past, both before as well as after 1945, and especially its suppression of the origins and history of the people who come to populate the 'new' Polish city after the expulsion of the German population: only after the events of 1989 and the relaxation of political censorship, does it become possible to explore and expose the truth about the Polish city's past — or rather *t r u t h s*, since Iwasiów's style of fiction deliberately, even programmatically, avoids a master narrative of what is 'true': many different stories are told in a non-hierarchical manner, final conclusions are left hanging, the narrator remains largely elusive and detached and does not impose any one-sided interpretation of reality. Iwasiów thereby concentrates on the need for individuals' suppressed memories and hidden pasts to be acknowledged — as the key, first, to self-understanding and identity formation, and hence in turn also to explaining the city's legendary melancholy (*Bambino*), and second, to a more positive outlook on the future (*Ku stońcu*). And in so doing, she extends the frames of reference as well as the appeal of the novels into a more universal domain beyond the boundaries of post-1945 Szczecin or of communist/post-communist Poland; her project is ultimately an existential one, not a socio-political one.

*Bambino* introduces four fictional protagonists who were children during World War II, and who come to be in Szczecin *via* various means:

Ula (born 1930), formerly Ulrike, the only one of the four indigenous to pre-war Stettin (after 1945, she stays in post-war communist Szczecin, suppresses her former German identity and cultivates Polish as her first language — her memories of her mother constitute one of the few memories of pre-Polish Stettin); Anna (also born 1930) comes to Szczecin from the Carpathian mountain region in order to study; Janek (born 1940) is an illegitimate child of Polish peasants from the Poznań region; Marysia (also born 1940) is resettled in the countryside near Szczecin as a result of the late transfers of peasant populations from the Sovietized Ukrainian borderlands in the late 1950s and then comes to the city also to study.

The progress of the lives of these four provides the loose, intertwined structure upon which the narrative develops, the eponymous milk-bar *Bambino* in the centre of Szczecin being the initial point of contact between them and the place they continue to meet: Ula and Anna work there and become friends, Marysia lodges with Ula and meets Janek in the bar, her future husband and employee of the internal security agency (married 1960, divorced 1973); all become estranged from their own families, backgrounds and roots (and in the cases of Ula and Marysia, also from their native languages) in the social melting-pot of the new socialist city, potentially full of fresh opportunity — but where the suppressed experience of their various pasts plays a fatal role in sabotaging their psychological preparedness to take advantage of it. Their lives are all marked by a sense of failure and sadness and of not quite connecting with life, in Marysia's case leading to debilitating alcoholism, where tragedy is inevitably transferred also in part to the next generation (born 1960s): Magda (born 1963, the same year as Iwasiów), the daughter of Marysia and Janek; and Tomek (born 1971), the son of Anna and her late marriage to a sea-captain. This suppression, according to Iwasiów, is the cause of the protagonists' lack of self-understanding and hence of the melancholy — a major theme, if not the main theme — of *Bambino*:

The germ of disaster came into being on the way, in the pre-histories, in their moving to the city in which they live. In the baggage of misfortune, in the loss on which they had to build. [...] There would be nothing particularly interesting in this, if it were not the fact that the sadness together with the lies about it became the inheritance of the children. Transfused into their bloodstream, masked by legends about the beauty of the lost land and the beauty of the new one regained, it poisons the next generation (IWASIÓW 2008: 317).

*Bambino* ends in 1981 against the background of the political events of the Polish August (1980) and the imposition of martial law (Decem-

ber 1981): also the year of Marysia's suicide and Magda's final school exams ('matura'). Here several critical points need to be made — regarding what the novels are n o t about, as well as what they are, and regarding the differences between them, which are significant. First of all, let us be clear that neither novel represents a nostalgic or sentimental portrait of the Polish People's Republic (Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa, PRL); nor is it a wistful or humorous fictional memoir, in the spirit of Antoni Libera's *Madame* (1998) or many others. As Iwasiów claimed in an interview, "We have had more than enough of nice nostalgic, humorous fictions about the PRL" (IWASIÓW 2009a).

Although on one level — namely, the very basic structural level — the second novel *Ku słońcu* takes up the story, so to speak, of Szczecin and its inhabitants in 1981 and takes it through to the 'present', i.e. circa 2008–2009 (the narrative perspective of both novels is clearly that of the present-day), it differs from *Bambino* in several fundamental ways and should therefore not be treated as a 'sequel', or the next episode in a kind of saga. *Ku słońcu* indeed features certain key figures from *Bambino*, most importantly Magda (the coeval of the author Iwasiów), now in her mid-40s, and Tomek, now about 40 years old, and also Ula (now in her late 70s) dying in a hospital bed (in the same pre-war German-built hospital where her own mother had died), where the slow withdrawal from life and eventual death of Ula serves as the crux of a narrative that brings Magda (who has been living in the West since the early 1980s) back to Szczecin, reunites Magda and Tomek, sets in motion their childhood memories (where the background is the relative — albeit illusionary — prosperity of the Gierek years, with the periodic political events in the Gdańsk shipyards mentioned in passing) and prompts a series of Szczecin-related dreams, which Magda experiences sleeping in Ula's flat (likewise in a pre-war building), which was also Magda's own former home for several years after her mother's suicide. Magda's dream-life takes up a large proportion of the text, and constitutes one of the narrative features that distinguish it from *Bambino*. There are also others significant differences generally in the language and style of narration, and I will address this aspect separately below.

In addition, there are other major generational differences. Whilst the mood of *Bambino* is one of sadness, pessimism, missed opportunity, the characters' strange detachment from life and inability to deal successfully with it, thus reflecting Szczecin's legendary 'smutek' as well as the 'grey' or 'colourless' world of drab socialist conformity, *Ku słońcu*, in contrast, is decidedly more optimistic, portraying a level of success (in terms of both personal happiness, and in terms of socio-economic and/or pro-

fessional achievement) in the next generation (born in the 1960s and indigenous to Szczecin) not achieved, and not psychologically accessible even to the previous generation (born 1930–1940). Magda has made a successful career for herself (by the time of *Ku słońcu*, she is a high-earning information scientist who travels around the world as part of her job) — and also, or so it would seem, by the time of the fictive present, resolved on a steady commitment to her lesbian partner Alison (Magda's emergence from the text as bisexual is one of its hidden aspects — admittance of such an identity in early-1980s Szczecin would have been unacceptable and may have been a contributing factor to her leaving, though this departure is portrayed primarily as Ula's initiative in reaction to Magda's father Janek's role as a 'bezpieka'); so has Tomek, who creates his own business in the relatively free economic climate of the 1990s, has plenty of money as a member of the emerging middle-class, wears designer clothes and keeps his exemplary body trim by marathon running, has an attractive wife, with whom he is at least moderately content, a young son, a comfortable home and an expensive car.

But *Ku słońcu* also introduces a series of further characters not featured at all in *Bambino*, and of the same generation as Magda and Tomek, and thus of the author herself: the couple Andrzej and Marzenka (who in contrast to the marital and sexual duos portrayed in *Bambino*, are shown to be happy and continue to be so), middle-class professionals: a former science lecturer at the Polytechnic, now a private producer of air-conditioning systems, and an academic librarian respectively, who broadly supported the Solidarity movement, and Małgorzata, a professor of Polish literature at Szczecin University, director of the Centre for the Study of Cultural Sexual Identity (Zakład Badań nad Kulturową Tożsamością Płci) who "at the end of the PRL, established contact with the feminist movement" (IWASIÓW 2010: 115), in whom it is hard not to see certain parallels with Iwasiów herself as teacher and researcher (IWASIÓW 2002; IWASIÓW 2004). In this respect, and especially in the passages of *Ku słońcu* that describe — and implicitly satirize — aspects of present-day university life (not only in Poland, many references are entirely recognizable to western scholars too) such as conflicts over departmental management structures and policies, rivalries between colleagues or dependence on external grant money for research projects and the tactics involved in obtaining it, place *Ku słońcu* in the academic-novel tradition of Lodge and Bradbury.

In addition, in *Ku słońcu*, there is a representative of the next generation, most importantly Marek, son of Andrzej and Marzenka, born in 1981 — who, interestingly, embodies something of an 'old-fashioned' re-

action against the self-serving capitalistic and technological ‘rat-race’ of the 1990s: a Polish literature scholar, he becomes the lover and live-in partner of Professor Małgorzata, in a dramatic reversal of the much more familiar male-professor-young-female-student scenario, which might enhance rather than threaten (as it does in Małgorzata’s case, due to the continued prevalence of chauvinism in academe) a male colleague’s career, and seems to have no materialistic ambitions. I would even suggest that a certain moral position is conveyed here through Andrzej and Marzenka and their son: As Andrzej declares towards the end of the novel, having given up his quest to discover from his IPN file<sup>4</sup> and other associated research who exactly informed on him in the 1980s and having resigned himself to not knowing, it is possible — irrespective of political and material circumstances (e.g. the temptations of the former black market, pressure to join the Party and inform on others) — to remain ‘moral’, i.e. to conduct oneself in an honest manner according to what he calls ‘old-fashioned values’, which it is implied, but not explicitly stated, are the pre-war (i.e. pre-PRL) values of his (Andrzej’s) parents’ generation:

[...] above all, we both, but in fact we three, because I am including Marek in this, live, lived, and will live honestly. I have gleaned from the past the conviction that we can gain everything from our work and we don’t have to betray anyone, or reject any ideals. [...] For ultimately we didn’t inform on anyone and aren’t responsible for the existence of informing on others. [...] I don’t like a lot of things, but the past is however closed, and the present depends only on us to the extent that we grasp it with our own hands. Like when I used to paint chimneys, wash the windows in high-rise blocks [...] and you worked as an office cleaner. Everything depended on us, and only on us. [...] we never speculated, never counted on a stroke of undeserved luck. Work, clean personal work. With our own hands, minds, hearts (IWASIÓW 2010: 309–310).

The personal is therefore undeniably interconnected with the public and political (the reference to cleaning offices and windows suggests this is what the couple had to do under martial law to avoid compromising themselves), but it is the individual human, existential and ethical dimensions that Iwasiów’s narrator chooses to foreground. For, although set in the context of post-war (1945–1981) and then of the changed post-1989 political situation in Poland respectively, this context is mentioned

---

<sup>4</sup> *Ku słońcu* [Towards the Sun], published 2010, includes this chronologically immediate background: of access to personal files kept by the internal security authorities on opposition activists during the PRL now held by the IPN; and of the public debate surrounding ‘lustracja’, uncovering retrospectively who was informing on whom, and the political and media discourse of ‘betrayal’ (‘zdrada’) and ‘traitors’ (‘zdrajcy’) fuelled by ideologues of the so-called ‘fourth republic’.



only in passing in the novels. Significant as certain events were for individuals, Iwasiów does not describe the evolution of post-war Polish politics. As Dariusz Nowacki says in his review of *Bambino*, Iwasiów deals with History with a small 'h' (NOWACKI 2008). The action takes place far away from the traditional centres of Polish political life (Warsaw, Kraków) as well as of resistance to communist power, despite physical proximity (Gdańsk). The class aspect, however, is interesting because here is yet another distinct contrast between the two novels. In *Bambino*, all the main protagonists hail from poor, working-class or peasant origins and seek opportunity in the relative classlessness of the post-war city, and do not represent the class origins of the traditional leaders of Polish society (ex-nobles or middle-class intelligentsia). In *Ku słońcu*, however, all the main protagonists are representatives of an emergent and economically comfortable, privileged middle-class (if not exactly rich in all cases: e.g. the contrast between the living standards of Andrzej and Marzenka, and Tomek and Sylwia) — i.e. of the people who have been able to take advantage of the new post-1989 conditions. The novel does not include any evidence of how the former industrial workers of the now defunct socialist reality might be adjusting or coping; in fact, one critic, Adam Madaliński (2010), identifies this as a 'sign of certain weakness' in Iwasiów's second novel. Or, could we say, that both Madaliński and indeed Iwasiów have identified an important aspect of the post-1989 changes that is not however fully articulated in the novel: that the move to liberal democracy and the free market since 1989 has favoured the emerging professional middle-classes, making them more similar in aspirations and achievements to their counterparts in the West, while leaving behind other, less fortunate sections of society, about which we now hear nothing?

It seems undeniable nevertheless that the changes of 1989 onwards were the key to the better life experiences of the 'second' generation, born in the 1960s. This was not just a question of political liberation per se, of the introduction of democracy and removal of a single state-sanctioned ideology, or the transition to a capitalist market economy: the lifting of state-imposed censorship at last allowed the past to be explored, articulated, analysed and, if not fully understood or known, at least accepted. It seems that this is what the two novels primarily achieve. They allow an unrestricted and individualized — yet at the same time universalized because much experience is after all common to all — exposure of the past, i.e. of the suppressed memories and histories of the city's immediate post-war inhabitants (the 1930s–1940s generation), when the censorship environment of the socialist state, building also on the na-

tionalistic myth of the ‘regained territories’ (a term decidedly inappropriate to the pre-war history of Stettin), promoted a new Polish socialist identity while not allowing the former identities of these people to be voiced. By exposing this problem, by articulating and ‘working through’ the traumas of the past in the first novel, the past may be laid to rest (or so the implication is) in order that the next generation may live more happily — hence, I suggest, the relatively optimistic tone of the second novel.

Let us look now at what Iwasiów has stated on the public record. In an interview given in 2009 to the local Szczecin edition of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Iwasiów addressed several key issues about *Bambino*’s origins and purpose. Whilst acknowledging the inevitability of autobiographical content (as someone who works in the field of literary research, she knows that “literature is always autobiographical”, that “writers never write about things that do not affect them”), she declares that *Bambino* is “more the biography of a generation than an individual”. While drawing on her own experience (“Children born in 1963 lived between the colours of hope and the greyness of what was only alluded to but never said. In this sense Magda is indeed me: I remember such a childhood”), the novel also fictionalizes the experiences of many other people known to her, and so “it is more than a private biography”, more than a search for what “sits in the mind and soul of Inga Iwasiów” (IWASIÓW 2009a).

When questioned further about her intentions, however, it transpires that it is not so much (at least not in *Bambino*) her desire to portray her own generation as the generations of her parents and grandparents, those who ‘founded’ the new Polish, communist Szczecin after the war, because otherwise their story would not be told and hence would be lost forever when they died. Why lost? Because it was not possible until 1989 to tell it truthfully. Here Iwasiów directly addresses the issue of communist censorship. As she goes on to say, this suppression of the real narrative (i.e. the narrative that the post-war generations recognize as ‘true’ because it tallies with their own experience of uprooting and disorientation, in many ways ‘traumatic’) is the root cause of the mood of disorientation, existential alienation and melancholy, which typically affects the city’s population:

I am not a professional writer, writing fiction is not my chief occupation. If I decide to write something, then it is only when I consider it absolutely necessary. In this case I realized the time had come when I must tell the story of the birth of this city after the war. My grandma is 86 years old, and it is people of her generation who know the beginning of this tale. It is a question of the physiology of memory, a question of the existence of a story that might be irretrievably erased. [...] Leave it a lit-

tle longer, and our founding tale will be extinguished, before we have written it down (IWASIÓW 2009a).

My seminar students write about the books by Katarzyna Suchodolska or Maria Boniecka. We try to read these dusty, library items. They are interesting to young Szczecin-ers — intellectually and emotionally. But this kind of literature, especially that written before 1989 is deeply ideological. Cautious, sprinkled with various make-believe by the censorship. Katarzyna Suchodolska wrote about post-war Szczecin, but it's a tale that emanated from a throttled throat. This literature stood no chance of being a true record of the complications that befell people in Szczecin. Politics made speaking impossible, it made people wipe away their own pasts. It censored people's moods (IWASIÓW 2009a).

A founding tale does not have to directly console. It does not have to persuade readers that they came here from their beautiful manor-houses in the eastern borderlands, or brought with them the agriculture of Great Poland, and that we're all doing fine. [...] The city has to pit itself against its own tales, except that first of all it has to tell itself those tales. In this sense my book [*Bambino*] is supposed to be a cleansing book. Because it shows that we don't have to resort to easy consolations, that we can grow up, stop being injured children. [...] Because if the trauma of our grandparents and parents never comes to the surface, we will go on ceaselessly inheriting their sadness. We Szczecin-ers are generally pessimists, we love to criticize, show our dissatisfaction. Why? I maintain that everything comes from the fact that we have never talked about where we come from, who we are. And we will not put a stop to this process of inheriting trauma until we name it. Our pessimism is a kind of internal symptom of unresolved issues (IWASIÓW 2009a).

The suggestion here of an 'infantile', somehow stunted mindset, or immaturity, among the first citizens of the new Szczecin is perhaps the appropriate place to discuss the titles of the novels, as they clearly have a bearing on the interpretation of the content.

*Bambino* is a word familiar to those who grew up in socialist Poland and has many associations. Iwasiów's adoption of it as the name of an actual milk-bar once located on Kościuszko Square, on the corner of Krzywousty and Sikorski streets in central Szczecin, has a number of references. It was the make, for example, of the turn-table on which Magda and Tomek played popular music as children. As Lucyna Marzec and Agnieszka Gajewska point out in their discussion of the novel, it was also the name of various other well-known products of the 1950s and 1960s, including a type of ice-cream, a kind of soap, or children's sun-protection cream or children's coloured crayons (MARZEC and GAJEWSKA 2009). In this way, Iwasiów jerks the memories of a generation of post-war children and conjures up a lost but rather 'babyish' world, but her intention is not nostalgic or sentimental, rather ironic. Marzec suggests the real function of these 'bambinos':

In the PRL, the designation ‘bambino’ appeared frequently and was a simulation of something exotic, southern, western — available to everyone. [...] I think the title is ironic and refers to the treatment of society as babyish (upupianie społeczeństwa) (MARZEC and GAJEWSKA 2009: 29).

She is not the only critic to draw on the Italian word for baby. Brygida Helbig-Mischewski, for example, identifies Magda not only as the ‘bambino’ but also — being the same age as Iwasiów — as the actual hidden narrator of *Bambino* (HELBIG-MISCHEWSKI 2009: 144), a point that Iwasiów does not deny (IWASIÓW 2009a).

*Ku słońcu*, the eponymous street-name [Towards the Sun], refers to a long east-west tract through Szczecin, along which workers would travel to the industrial estates and factories lying to the east of the city centre. This meant that they would always be travelling ‘towards the sun’, in the morning towards the east and the rising sun, and in the evening towards its setting on their return journey. It is also the location of the city’s largest cemetery, pre-dating the founding of Polish Szczecin, where Ula will be laid to rest, therefore also suggesting further possible metaphorical meanings.

In the interview cited above, Iwasiów speaks of the ‘physiology of memory’ and also emphasizes the existential importance of place, the literal physical place where we live and write: “Where we live is constantly of primary importance. I don’t believe we are all contemporary nomads or people of the net” (IWASIÓW 2009a).<sup>5</sup> It is therefore revealing to ask how she portrays place, because one of the most striking things about these novels set in Szczecin is that the narrator does not describe the city as such. Constant mention is made of city landmarks: names of roads, suburbs, parks, buildings (schools, hospitals, cinemas, restaurants), which no doubt for readers who grew up in the city jog the memory and evoke vivid chains of associations, but there are no descriptions of these landmarks or of the cityscape in general. How then is the city, the place, primarily conveyed?

Roma Sendyka, in her discussion of *Ku słońcu*, claims convincingly that place is portrayed through the body (SENDYKA 2010: 79–80), i.e. through the senses — not through the master gaze of the narrator, i.e. not through an all-seeing eye which imposes its own vision and perceptions

---

<sup>5</sup> Here Iwasiów distances herself from Joanna Bator, who sees the modern condition as one of nomadism and claims to feel at home anyway. For a comparison between the feminisms of these two writers as expressed in their narrative and linguistic techniques in *Bambino* and Bator’s *Piaskowa Góra* [Sandy Hill] (2009), see my article PHILLIPS forthcoming 2012.

on the text and hence on the reader, but through smells, tastes, other physical attributes conveyed through touch and bodily sensations. Sendyka draws attention to a similar manner of portraying place in Iwasiów's earlier, shorter prose work *Miasto — ja — miasto* [The City — Me — City] (1998), in particular the subchapter entitled *Miejsce i ciało* [Place and Body] where the narrator states: "The city consists of the body. Of what it remembers. Of retrospective turns. Of leapings forward" (IWASIÓW 1998: 76). The point is well made and is further borne out, I would argue, by the technique of conveying place and atmosphere in Iwasiów's collection of short stories set against the traumatic background of the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s, and indicated by the volume's very title: *Smaki i dotyki* [Tastes and Touches] (2006). Iwasiów's narrator is highly sensitive in this regard, in both novels under discussion here: In *Bambino* we have the tactile tailor Helmut, Magda's physical empathy with the terminally ill music teacher; then there are the intimate detailed descriptions of clothes, beds, interiors, food (including Magda's anorexia or bulimia), tangible objects that can be picked up, felt and held. *Ku stońcu* similarly foregrounds the intimate details of Magda's physical experience, including her initially promiscuous sex-life and urinary infections, the cold dank ambience of London's bedsit world, the dusty stale atmosphere of Ula's flat, Ula's wardrobe still packed with Stefan's thirty-year-old shirts, the stench of household rubbish awaiting collection, of petrol and exhaust fumes coming up from the street, the pervasive smells of the hospital ward.

Conversely, the eye itself is always distanced. The narrator often records a character (especially Magda and Małgorzata — the ones with whom the narrator, and by extension, the author herself may be most strongly identified) opening a window, standing at a window looking out, often in reflective mood — another point also emphasized by Sendyka (2010: 80), and which also incidentally forms the narrative set-up of the opening scene of *Miasto — ja — miasto*, entitled *Insomnia* (IWASIÓW 1998: 7–15). The window opens a way into the world outside, but both observation and understanding are limited; at the same time the opening of the window seems like a switching-off to the immediate situation going on in the room, again marking human interaction and understanding as only partial. Not unlike the view from the window — distanced observation that also distances the subject doing the observing — the visual perspective of the novels (especially in *Ku stońcu*) resembles somewhat that of the film camera, recording and selectively focusing, but not directly commenting or interpreting. The text of *Ku stońcu* frequently makes reference to the 1970s' and early 80s' cinemas of Szczecin,

recalled by Magda and Tomek from their teenage years, to specific film titles (usually western hits passed by the former censors) or popular TV serials, all of which serves to emphasize the cinematic, sometimes even video-clip or screen-rolling character of the narrative. Photographs also frequently appear in the narrative, as does the private camera: Magda realizes, looking at old photos left in Ula's flat, that the photographer was Stefan, Ula's Jewish lover forced to go abroad in 1968; a lost presence that also emphasizes the general absence of Jews post-1945. Stefan's 'Zorka' camera is juxtaposed with the modern 'Sony' owned by Tomek, one of many small symbols of the transition from the Soviet planned economy to ownership of western models.<sup>6</sup> Another eye, of course, is the internal eye that sees and records the dream sequences, dreams in which Magda recycles parts of her conscious experience and unconscious memories of the past, which she herself seems to regard as therapeutic — she enjoys dreaming, and on waking sometimes tries to consciously reinstate the interrupted dream and the 'parallel' life she lives or relives there.<sup>7</sup>

Here, we come to a fundamental characteristic of Iwasiów's prose: the quite specific and unique style of narration and language, particularly in the earlier novel *Bambino*, reflecting a particular kind of human perception of the world, which in her narratives is always incomplete, partial, non-hierarchical and non-hegemonic. I discuss this in more detail elsewhere (Phillips, forthcoming, see footnote 5 above); suffice it to say here that the disjointed, broken linguistic style, fragmented sentences, sometimes incorrect grammar, over-punctuation, sometimes misunderstood by critics as stylistic defects (CIEŚLIK 2008; HOJDEN 2008), are a conscious attempt to convey trauma — extreme experience (such as witnessing wartime horrors, or being uprooted and displaced from one's own history) requires traumatized language.<sup>8</sup> Bożena Karwowska interprets

---

<sup>6</sup> It is beyond the scope of the current article, but the use of the gaze, the window and the camera-like vision in *Miasto — ja — miasto* and *Ku słońcu* merits, in my view, further exploration in the light of Lacan, Barthes and Jacqueline Rose (*Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, 1986), especially as it relates to the gendered vision of both Magda and Małgorzata.

<sup>7</sup> Again beyond the scope of the current issue, the use of dream sequences (including the Freudian aspects), which occupy a large proportion of the text of *Ku słońcu*, also deserve further investigation.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, the opening words of *Bambino*, which convey Marysia's wartime terror of possible murder and rape: "Maria carries it inside her, I swear. An image of the journey, but not only. Something that happened in the course of it. Something left far behind her. Like all the others, she has this something inside her, the threads run together, the genes, they intersect, various things can arise from this combination, and I want to find out who they are — perhaps it is actually my story, but it could just as well be not mine or anyone else's. I want to rummage in the pictures, carbon copies and waste paper. There's

this as the deliberate construction of a female language by a writer well-versed in feminist theory and inspired by the *écriture féminine* of Cixous and Kristeva (KARWOWSKA 2010). Agnieszka Gajewska, however, claims that — while inspired by feminism — it is a form of language constructed to convey any traumatized experience, including that of men (GAJEWSKA 2010a). Such language is also related to Iwasiów's narrator's portrayal of human personalities and the impossibility of capturing another human being's perspective, which can only ever be partial and fragmentary. Hence the frequently repeated idea in *Bambino* of 'ties', 'bonds', 'bundles' loosely held together by 'laces' ('węzełki', 'związki', 'więzi', 'sznureczki') — portrayal of another person can only be at best an unstable cluster of random perceptions: hence the narrative goes against the grain of all-embracing ideologies and theories, whether it be feminism, psychoanalysis, postcolonialism, or a political ideology such as communism, suggesting the insufficiency of all these to explain human experience of the world; the human psyche eludes such attempts at definition or explanation within these confining categories:

People are like bundles: it can't be known what collects in them and whether it's possible to unravel them. Whoever imagines then can create a myth or saga, is mistaken. Bundles are bundles. Nothing less, nothing more (IWASIÓW 2008: 66).

Ultimately, one might say, Iwasiów's prose is a lesson in humility. In *Ku stońcu*, however, the language is much closer to standard literary Polish, is not so broken up or itself traumatized, another reflection perhaps that the second generation of post-war Szczecin's inhabitants presented in *Ku stońcu* is more secure in its identity and less traumatized by a hidden past.

Thus it is in the context of form of expression, language, in the detail that Iwasiów's feminism expresses itself, particularly in *Bambino*. Is it then a women's text? A text primarily, though not exclusively, about women?

My heroines try to take advantage of the post-war opportunity. No one controls them, at least for a moment. But it transpires that post-war self-sufficiency is an illusion. [...] I don't even know whether I consciously planned such an outcome, such a construction. I think that the post-war story should be a story about women, independently of my feminism" (IWASIÓW 2009a).

---

nothing to hold on to, no album, no diary, no central concept, apart from need. There are just disconnected stories instead, whatever someone has made up about himself. About the person he is". Translation found on following website: <http://www.rochester.edu/College/translation/threepersent/index.php?id=1964> [accessed: 30.12.2011].

*Ku słońcu*, meanwhile, is structured around the gradual death of Ula (Ulrike) and the return of Magda, but in this novel the male protagonists (Tomek, Andrzej, Marek, Arek) are given a much more prominent role than Janek or Stefan. However, the presence of professor Małgorzata Malinowska adds another significant female dimension: the encounter with western feminism and the introduction, made possible by the opening up of society and academic life to western ideas, scholarship and money following the watershed of 1989 and the much greater opportunities for Polish scholars to travel to western Europe and North America to conferences and on research grants, and to cultivate contacts with scholars outside Poland, of feminist ideas, women's studies and gender studies into Polish universities — an area of scholarship that was rapidly assimilated in certain milieus in the 1990s, notably by Iwasiów herself, although it remains, as indeed in the West, attractive only to limited centres and already feels the effects of a conservative backlash after 2000, though this is not the topic of *Ku słońcu*.

The feminist aims of Małgorzata prompt her to pursue a research project on a neglected, elusive 18<sup>th</sup>-century German-speaking local woman writer, Hildegarda, allegedly three times married before she entered the cloister, and the presumed author of poetry collections and a personal diary that critiques the position of women in contemporary society. A worthy aim familiar to those who have embarked on similar endeavours! However, Iwasiów's narrator introduces a vital irony: Małgorzata, aided by Marek, is forced to admit that her research enquiries have led to an impasse and that Hildegarda must have been a hoax: there is no concrete evidence to confirm that Hildegarda existed at all, no proof that the texts allegedly by her were actually by her, there are no other 'primary' sources. Eventually, at the end of the novel, it becomes clear from a reproduced exchange of letters (without comment from the narrator) between two elderly German women of pre-war Szczecin (one still living there and one who left after the war) that Hildegarda was their invention, promoted at the time by a local club of book-lovers. Małgorzata (unaware, however, of the existence of the German women) is forced to abandon this feminist project in the interests of academic integrity. So is this another lesson in humility? A reminder that our ideological choices can lead us, if we are not careful, into blindness and dishonesty? That the individual experiences of women (Ula, Magda, Marzenka, Sylwia) are important in themselves irrespective of 'feminism' *per se* — or of any academic, or indeed political sanctioning? Yet the question remains unaddressed as to why the German women felt the need to create Hildegarda in the first place? Was it only a joke? According to reviewer Ilona God-



lewska, Hildegarda is “a symbol of the elusiveness of life, but also proof that not everything lends itself to being examined and explained” (GOD-LEWSKA 2010: 118).

To conclude, Iwasiów conveys a sense of the vast human consequences of population displacement immediately following the redrawing of state boundaries after World War II, and then the ideological suppression of any discussion of this; she suggests this is the cause of the city's legendary sadness, the root cause of the first generation of inhabitants' psychological inability to take advantage of the immediate post-war opportunities offered by the new socialist city. Iwasiów is one of several contemporary Polish writers who have thematized this experience, though in different pre-war German areas of the so-called ‘regained territories’, but no other writer, to my knowledge, portrays so painfully (using appropriate language, which is perhaps the key to Iwasiów's effectiveness) the deep psychological consequences of this suppression. The next generation of Szczecin's inhabitants (born in the 1960s: Tomek and Magda, Andrzej and Marzenka, Małgorzata) inherit elements of the parents' trauma and unhappiness, but they are more secure in identifying with the city, even though the deeper past remains hidden. It would seem, however, that this generation (in their late teens or early 20s in the late Gierek era — the time of the rise of Committee for the Defence of Workers (Komitet Obrony Robotników, KOR), the shipyard strikes, Solidarity, martial law) and in their mid- or late 20s when the political system underwent fundamental change and opening up after 1989, was psychologically equipped to create a happier world for themselves, whether as academics, other professionals or businessmen in the new market-economy (we realize, in the course of *Ku słońcu*, that private black-market capitalist enterprises undertaken in the late phase of the planned economy in the mid-1980s prepared many for this, in more ways than one; even the ex-informer Janek, now without a job, is able to turn his hand in the 1990s to the production of Marmite!). Or are these positive outcomes, as Madaliński suggests, merely limited to the emerging middle-classes, most of whom have some form of higher education?

Essentially, however, and as I have suggested throughout this article, Iwasiów's is an existential and not a socio-political project: the death of Ulrike-Ula emerges as one of the structurally cohesive elements of *Ku słońcu*, overarching or underpinning the narrative as it comments on everything else; Ula is always present, so to speak. After Ula's death and burial (precisely in the large city cemetery which is located on the very street called *Ku słońcu*), Magda has no reason to stay in Szczecin, the past has been laid to rest. Andrzej, having reconciled himself to the past and

to not being able to uncover it completely, also says as much. From Magda's point of view, back in the West, *Ku słońcu* could conceivably also imply looking back towards Szczecin in the morning (i.e. towards Europe, to the east where the sun rises, referring thus to the double-directional meaning of the street name), but the novel ends with Magda looking west, towards the sun setting over the Pacific, from her new abode in Vancouver, i.e. looking away from the past towards the future (with or without Alison: this element ultimately remains hidden). Also, is this a way of looking out towards universal human experience and to the wider world from the space-specific? Iwasiów knows that, although the places where we live and work are fundamental to our consciousness and identity, our humanity transcends these; but she also knows that without secure psychological and emotional grounding in truthful ('true' for us) knowledge about who we really are and where we come from, that humanity is forever crippled and inevitably trapped in its own self-reflective sadness.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BAKUŁA, Bogusław (2007): Colonial and Postcolonial Aspects of Polish Discourse on the Eastern "Borderlands". [In:] Janusz KOREK (ed.): *From Sovietology to Postcoloniality: Poland and Ukraine from a Postcolonial Perspective*. Stockholm: Södertörns Högskola, 41–59.
- BURYŁA, Sławomir (2009): Słodko-gorzki smak PRL. *Pogranicza* 1, 91–93.
- CAVANAGH, Clare (2003): Postkolonialna Polska. Biała plama na mapie współczesnej teorii. Trans. Tomasz Kunz. *Teksty drugie* 2/3, 60–71.
- CHŁOSTA-ZIELONKA, Joanna (2010): O trudzie zapominania. *Fraza* 1, 307–308.
- CHMIELEWSKA, Katarzyna (2011): Hydra pamiątek. Pamięć historyczna w dekompozycji. [In:] Katarzyna CHMIELEWSKA and Grzegorz WOŁOWIEC (eds.): *Opowiedzieć PRL*. Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 16–32.
- CIEŚLIK, Krzysztof (2008): Wyziedziczeni. *Twórczość* 12, 122–124.
- GAJEWSKA, Agnieszka (2010a): Nie ma się czego trzymać — najnowsza polska literatura feministyczna wobec mitu założycielskiego. [In:] Hanna GOSK (ed.): *Nowe dwudziestolecie (1989–2009). Rozpoznania, hierarchie, perspektywy*. Warsaw: Elipsa, 245–260.
- GAJEWSKA, Agnieszka (2010b): O pierwszym rozdziale *Bambino* Ingi Iwasiów. Wykład poznański. *Litteraria Copernicana* 1(5), 62–71.
- GLENSK, Urszula (2010): [Review of *Ku słońcu*]. *Odra* 10, 112–113.
- GODLEWSKA, Ilona (2010): W poszukiwaniu słońca. *Twórczość* 12, 116–118.
- GOSK Hanna (ed.) (2010): *Opowieści „skolonizowanego/kolonizatora”*. W kregu studiów postzależnościowych nad literaturą polską XX i XXI wieku. Kraków: Universitas.
- HELBIG-MISCHEWSKI, Brygida (2009): Szlak prowadzący do nas. *Kresy* 1–2(77–78), 141–146.
- HOJDEN, Ama (2008): Inga Iwasiów *Bambino*. *Zadra. Pismo Feministyczne* 3–4, 108.
- IWASIÓW, Inga (1998): *Miasto — ja — miasto*. Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Kurier-Press.
- IWASIÓW, Inga (2002): *Rewindykacje. Kobieta czytająca dzisiaj*. Kraków: Universitas.

- IWASIÓW, Inga (2004): *Gender dla średnio zaawansowanych. Wykłady szczecińskie*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo W.A.B.
- IWASIÓW, Inga (2006): *Smaki i dotyki*. Warszawa: Świat Książki.
- IWASIÓW, Inga (2008): *Bambino*. Warszawa: Świat Książki.
- IWASIÓW, Inga (2009a): "Bambino", Szczecin i my [interview with Ewa Podgajna and Wojciech Jachim]. *Gazeta Wyborcza* (Szczecin) 19, 23 January, *Opinie* 7. <http://szukaj.wyborcza.pl/archiwum/> [accessed: 26.08.2010].
- IWASIÓW Inga (2009b): Bar Bambino i smutek PRL-u [interview with Paweł Smoleński]. *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 24 September.
- IWASIÓW, Inga (2010): *Ku słońcu*. Warszawa: Świat Książki.
- KARWOWSKA, Bożena (2010): Konstruowanie kobiecego języka narracji migracyjnej w prozie polskiej po roku 1989. [In:] Hanna GOSK (ed.): *Nowe dwudziestolecie (1989–2009). Rozpoznania. Hierarchie. Perspektywy*. Warszawa: Elipsa, 282–297.
- KLIMOWICZ, Marcin (2010): Cmentarz przy ulicy Ku słońcu. *Akcent* 4, 101–103.
- MADALIŃSKI, Artur (2008): Przekleństwo pamięci. *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 12 February. <http://tygodnik.onet.pl/43,0,17967,przeklenstwo-pamieci,artykul.html> [accessed: 30.12.2011].
- MADALIŃSKI, Artur (2010): Życiorysy równoległe. *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 30 June. <http://tygodnik.onet.pl/1,48676,druk.html> [accessed: 30.12.2011].
- MARZEC, Lucyna and GAJEWSKA, Agnieszka (2009): Lekturowa uczta. O literaturze feministycznej rozmawiają Lucyna Marzec i Agnieszka Gajewska. *Zadra. Pismo Feministyczne* 1–2, 29–32.
- MIZERKIEWICZ, Tomasz (2008): Postfeministyczna proza więzi rodzinnych. *Nowe Książki* 11, 46.
- MIZERKIEWICZ, Tomasz (2010): Krytyka żywotów równoległych. *Nowe Książki* 6, 62–63.
- NOWACKI, Dariusz (2008): Dlaczego PRL mógł się kiedyś podobać. *Gazeta Wyborcza* 235, 7 October, *Kultura* 14.
- NOWACKI, Dariusz (2010): Powieść *Ku słońcu* [Ingi Iwasiów]. *Gazeta Wyborcza* 80, 6 April, *Kultura* 17.
- NYCZ, Ryszard (ed.) (2011): *Kultura po przejściach, osoby z przeszłością. Polski dyskurs postzależnościowy*, tom 1, *Konteksty i perspektywy badań*. Kraków: Universitas.
- PHILLIPS, Ursula (forthcoming 2012): Problems of Feminism and Postfeminism in Novels by Inga Iwasiów and Joanna Bator. [In:] Urszula CHOWANIEC and Ursula PHILLIPS (eds.): *Gender, Woman's Voice and Feminism in Polish Cultural Memory*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press.
- RADZIWON, Marek (2009): Polska w barze Bambino. *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 23 June.
- SENDYKA, Roma (2010): Miasto i ja, i miasto. O *Ku słońcu* Ingi Iwasiów. *Pogranicza* 2, 70–87.
- SŁOMAK, Iwona (2010): Porwanie. *FA-art* 1–2, 122–126.

