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Restoring Scorched Maps: Adventure, Memory, and History in Tomasz Różycki's *Twelve Stations*

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0:31

Today's speaker is Łukasz Wodzyński who joined the UW-Madison faculty in Fall 2019 as an Assistant Professor of Polish. Łukasz holds a PhD in comparative literature from the University of Toronto and his research interests include adventure and literature, culture and society, Polish and Russian modernism, post-communism, enchantment, disenchantment, re-enchantment (which we needed with the technology today), sociology of literature and genre theory. And he is finishing a monograph on strategies of re-enchantment in the Polish and Russian modernist novel and researching his forthcoming book-like project, which will examine the concept of adventure in the context of East Central European post-communist literature. So, his talk today "Restoring Scorched Maps: Adventure, Memory and History in Tomasz Różycki's *Twelve Stations*." So, please join me in welcoming Łukasz.

Łukasz Wodzyński

1:41

Thank you, I'd like to thank Jennifer Tishler and CREECA for inviting me here today. And of course, thank you all for being here to hear my talk, which and I cannot stress enough, is still a work that's in progress. So, your input and feedback will be greatly appreciated. As such the presentation is part of a bigger research project, which looks at cultural expression of adventure in post-communist East Central Europe.

2:13

As such, the project has two objectives. One, to build a theoretical framework for the study of adventure experiences and cultural texts, focusing on psychology, affects and ethics of adventure rather than generic conventions. And two to apply this conceptual apparatus to study the changes that have taken place in the social imaginaries of East Central Europe, as the countries in question, that is Poland, Ukraine and Russia, transition from the communist modernization project to a capitalist one.

2:44

In today's talk, I will be discussing one particular case study namely Tomasz Różycki, a contemporary Polish poet, and his 2004 epic poem in prose *Twelve Stations*, as an example of a successful use of the Adventure Romans Form to intervene in the realm of collective and cultural memory. I will introduce the author and

his work, look at the historical context and the cultural memory built around the postwar expatriations, and then outline ways in which Różycki's text engages with that memory. So, without further ado...

3:21

So, over the course of his 20 year long literary career, Tomasz Różycki rose to prominence as one of the most recognizable voices in contemporary Polish poetry. And this distinguished position owes largely, though not exclusively to *Twelve Stations*, his 2004 mock epic poem, which was received with great enthusiasm by critics and readers alike, which I'm sure, you know is not often the case. The volume turned a promising local author into a well-known mainstream poet. It won the prestigious Koscielski Award, paving the way for numerous other distinctions. It also inspired several adaptations for theater and radio, and even found its way into high school curriculum in Poland, effectively making Różycki a contemporary classic. Bill Johnston's award winning translation of 12 stations, along with two volumes of poetry translated by Mira Rosenthal, further consolidated Różycki's status in the Polish cultural field, and brought him wider international recognition (that is in the Anglo-American world; he's already quite popular in Germany).

4:55

So, what earns *Twelve Stations* the label, the mantle of a modern masterpiece? For one, in this frenetic tale about a community of Eastern expatriates living in Silesia, who undertake a final journey to their last homeland, Różycki successfully marries seemingly irreconcilable qualities. His work manages to be both ironic and nostalgic, private and universal, admiring and satirical, serious and humorous, complex and accessible, lofty and bawdy, mythopoetic and iconoclast. Such impressive range finds reflection in the rich intertextual tapestry Różycki weaves in his poem in terms of genre, writes Bill Johnston in the preface to his translation, " *Twelve Stations* manages to be all things to all people." He lists among Różycki's generic influences, classical epics, *gawęda* (which is the narrative imitating oral performance championed by the Polish nobility class in the 17th century), mock epics, as well as romantic poetry, especially Adam Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz*, which is the primary intertext of *Twelve Stations*. And also as the poet himself had admitted in a number of interviews, when he began working on this text he initially conceived of it as a novel, only later breaking down the prose into what resembled an epic poem, which further extends the text literary genealogy. In recent years, literary scholars have successfully explored the interpretive possibilities offered by those different genres. In the context of the work and mapped the intertextual web the author spins in his narrative. Although, as many note, Różycki's work still seems under-researched given both the quality and popularity of his poetry.

7:14

It caught my interest that on this long list of generic influences Bill Johnson also includes romance, a genre or mode that has hitherto received scant critical attention not only in the context of Różycki's poetry, but more importantly also in Polish scholarly tradition, in general. The term "romance" originally referred to secular works written in the romance languages in the Middle Ages, has seen gradually its meaning narrowed down to designate tales of a fantastic adventure in courtly love that superseded the earlier heroic epics and *chanson de geste*. So, these are the dangerous books that fill the imagination of Don Quixote in Cervantes's 17th century magnum opus itself, that mark a historic shift in the history of the genre, which breaks off from the chivalric romance and intertwines with the history of the modern novel. Oftentimes scorned by both enlightenment luminaries and champions of the rising realism, romances became synonymous with excess, dangerous flights of fancy and escapism. And despite the efforts of figures like Walter Scott, Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Morris and others, romance gradually turned from being a high literary form, adopted by the likes of Ariosto e Tasso to a generic blueprint for popular fiction. As Margaret Bruzelius notes, novelists clearly indebted to the romance traditions, such as Joseph Conrad

and Walter Scott, are studied for their ability to transcend the genetic material that structures their practice, while authors who have not succeeded in crossing that the great divide, like Verne and Dumas for example, are great of their kind.

9:10

Adventure romance may have ventured into Różycki's work through various routes. The 19th century classics, works by Walter Scott, Jules Verne, Robert Louis Stevenson, Alexander Dumas, to name but a few. But then there was also Polish romantic tradition. Notably Adam Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz* and Juliusz Słowacki's *Beniowski*, both of which, incidentally, romanticize the 17th century Polish mobility, which to this day feeds Polish adventurer imagination, and of course, last but not least, the most pervasive incarnation of the romance in the form of contemporary popular culture. Whatever the source, I will argue the tropes and narrative structure of romance not only complements the poem's epic and satirical qualities, but actually allows Różycki to work through the trans-generational trauma and grant his collective protagonists, to the community of Eastern expatriates, a symbolic agency they were denied in pre- and post-1989 official discourses. So before proceeding further with this argument, I would like to say a few words about the historical context that informs Różycki's book and I apologize in advance if some of the information will be familiar to you, but hopefully the interest of the context itself will be worth your time.

10:53

So, in accordance with the secret protocol of the Ribbentrop-Molotov of 1938, the Nazi German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939 which started World War II, was followed shortly after with the Soviet Union's invasion on the eastern territories of Poland, even though the Soviet Union never formally declared the war on Poland. In the immediate aftermath of the September campaign, which ended with the complete obliteration of the Polish Armed Forces, Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union divided the Polish territory, according to the previously agreed on spheres of influence.

11:41

Focusing on the eastern territories, almost immediately after annexing them into the Soviet Union's territory, the Soviet Army and NKVD began mass arrests and deportations of Poles from land east of the San and Bug rivers, sending them to prison and labor camps in Siberia, the Arctic region and other remote parts of the Soviet Union. It is estimated that in less than two years of Soviet occupation of eastern Poland close to 600,000 Polish citizens have been forcibly dislocated this way. Poles were not the only ethnic group that was relocated in this way, but of the 1.2 million people that were relocated in this fashion, they constituted a majority. Of those deported more than 100,000 died, including 22,000 Polish officers and intelligentsia members, killed by the NKVD at several killing sites in the Katyn forest.

After Hitler's army began implementing Operation Barbarossa, in the summer of 1941, the Soviet Union became a crucial member of the Alliance. Stalin's diplomatic and military leverage, combined with the fact that by the end of World War II virtually all of Eastern Europe was under Soviet control, there was little discussion in the Allied camp as to what would happen with the territories originally annexed by the Soviet Union in 1939 – the so-called Eastern Borderlands, which are part of today's Lithuania, Belarus and Western Ukraine.

13:50

Poland was to be compensated for its territorial losses by acquiring formerly German territories along the Oder-Nysa river borders and parts of Russia. They were euphemistically referred to by the Polish communist government as "recovered" territories or "retrieved" territories. Which is one of those unusual

instances, well, maybe not so unusual instance in history, where a communist government actually adopts a right wing nationalist conception or geopolitical idea of Poland in the territorial shape going back to the 11th century, where these territories were part of Poland and never since. Today, they're more neutrally referred to as western and northern territories, but back in the day they were known under the unofficial name of "Polish Wild West." In fact, one of the first, very few Polish westerns takes place in those Western territories.

15:22

The territorial swap effected another wave of mass relocations. First, the vast majority of Germans occupying these territories were expelled. And then in subsequent years, these lands were populated by expatriates from the east of Poland, from the former Eastern Borderlands. Many of them faced a choice of either staying in the east and adopting a Soviet passport with all the consequences of that, which for some meant further repressions, and most importantly, being drafted in the army. For young men especially this was a considerable threat. And so, the choice was either to stay and adopt a Soviet passport or move with whatever little belongings they could actually take with them on trains and settle towns and cities in those western and northern territories. In many cases, in fact, the decision was made by the authorities. That is, some of these people were actually forced to abandon their homes, and with their families were put on cattle trains that then took them to their new homes. This is a map showing some of those major population transfers that took place in the years 1944 to 1946.

17:19

All in all, more than 1.2 million people were officially repatriated to Poland in the years 1945-1947. Most of them prompted by the tragic experiences of 1939 to 41, administrative and psychological threats, and as I mentioned in many cases, the direct use of violence. The geographical, social, and cultural mass dislocation – and it is important to emphasize that much of the former Eastern Borderlands communities were essentially agrarian – so once they were put on those trains, they arrived in what is essentially an urban setting. There are still lots of anecdotes and stories that describe, for example, ways in which people tried to tie goats to lampposts and use public lawns as pastures and things like that, simply because this was the type of life they were familiar with, but now they were forced to basically make their homes in a completely culturally and socially different setting. The chaotic nature of the resettlement, notes the Polish historian Krystyna Goławska, made it impossible to recreate familiar environments in the newly settled areas. People did in time take root in their new communities, but these roots were much weaker than the old ones had been. No matter how strongly the new residents of broad swath felt about the town, it was sentiment qualitatively different from the bonds that had linked Livovians to Lvov and Vilnians to Vilnius.

19:01

Needless to say, during the forty-odd years of the communists' rule over Poland, this major collective trauma could never be acknowledged as such. On the contrary, the postwar communist press represented settling in western territories as a challenge, but also a great adventure. The settlers themselves, particularly expatriates from the east who constituted the larger portion of this new collective (even though there were some migrations from central Poland as well) were depicted as, essentially, heroes, pioneers, soldiers and guardians. In a way the embodiment of the socialist ideal of a hard worker who works for the better communist tomorrow.

Somewhat ironically, this depiction corresponded to part of the cultural identity of Eastern borderlands which, historically, since at least the 17th/16th century, was considered the bulwark of Christianity. Antemurale Christianitatis was one of those founding ideas of the nobility order in Poland, which basically

imagined the territories beyond the Bug River, the eastern borderlands, as a kind of wall separating Western Christian Europe from the tartar invasions. So, in a way this identity will swap, where now they settle these territories and have to defend Eastern Europe from the German invaders.

And of course, their public image was further enhanced with the typical communist depiction of glorification of socialist workers, those who work really hard to turn those territories into properly Polish towns and cities. So, there was a kind of combination of glorification and disavowal at the same time. The issue of the recovered territories made a brief return in the 1960s after the politics of thaw were implemented. And this time, the official rhetoric of successes and national unity dictated by the government could be put to the side. However, the new form of addressing the theme, focusing on the complexities of community formation and dogmatics of building the socialist modernity was still largely censored and hardly provided a forum to discuss the consequences of severing the ties Eastern settlers had with their former homelands.

22:25

After the communist regime collapsed in Poland in 1989, the public and cultural image of expatriates once again changed and became that of martyrs and passive victims of an ethnic cleansing: uprooted, transported in degrading conditions to unfamiliar spaces, where they had to organize their lives anew, having to deal with the postwar chaos, privations and brutality, and for the longest time deprived of rights to organize and express their collective pain. Paradoxically, therefore, while the new public and historical discourse finally offered the community the freedom to remember, commemorate, and publicly address this tragedy, it also stripped them of their historical agency and the heroic aura surrounding their efforts to reorganize their lives and postwar realities. Which by now, to many of them, has become something of a point of pride, one of the few that were allowed to them and now an alienable part of their identity.

23:35

So, going back to Różycki's *Twelve Stations* and the way he intervenes in that cultural discourse. As if it's an adventure romance, the narrative of *Stations* revolves around a quest. Upon returning to his family home in Opole, an apartment building inhabited by the community of expatriates from the east, the protagonist, the hero, called "the grandson" is promptly sent by Grandma and Auntie (both capitalized) the family matriarchs, on a mission that involves restoring the local church in Gliniany, currently in Ukraine. And I couldn't do a better job summarizing the nature of this task than the narrator of the poem, so I'll just quote the appropriate passage. Also, to give you a sense of the tone of this work. It was rendered beautifully in English by Bill Johnson.

24:51

"So then, someone was needed to embark on the mission. To gather the family that fate and adversity had scattered all over the world, around Poland and all the Polish provinces. To unite them in common cause and undertake an expedition to Gliniany and Zadwórze, original home of Babcia and Auntie, so as to rescue the parish and the church, take part in the May Day service, and last, but not least, spend some time with Babcia. For who knew if such an opportunity would present itself again, in these uncertain times. It was a task for a hero in the classical mold. Not only was the family 300 strong and dispersed across the entire globe, it was also necessary to speak to them, which when one knew their characters and peculiarities constituted a trial worthy of a true latter day Jason, Hercules, Asterix, and MacGyver. Yet, if the mission should end in glory, and the audacious fellow returned from it with his wits intact, he was destined for high acclaim. For Auntie intended to invite the presidents of both Poland and Ukraine to the church celebration. So, the day might see an act of reconciliation. And, like symbols of two fraternal lands that were yet so severely at odds with one another, having been split asunder by third parties and the

whisperings of devils from Muscovy and elsewhere, might come back to one another, and unite again. This ceremony would be a kind of mystic wedding, a marriage party of nations, fulfillment of the prophecies of Saint Kinga, Cleopatra and ancient horae, who might once again deign to appear in this company and hand the Chosen One, a Golden Horn or magical flute, with the aid of which lost nations would return to the fold, and the spirit of enterprise in regional autonomy would spread its wings. And what if this event were to coincide with the Pope's planned visit to Ukraine right around spring? If this were to come off, there would surely be a miracle of unity and a total revival of the world."

27:29

So, as you can see, the stakes couldn't be any higher.

27:34

At the family Council, the grandson, who is not as young as once he had been, yet still spry (which makes me immediately identify with him), is chosen to be the one to carry out the task. What follows is a series of mock adventure episodes during which the grandson assembles the magical artifacts like the family gorget that could quote unquote "guide and protect him during his ever so perilous expedition", and also assembles the eccentric family members from the apartment building and the nearby villages. After all the joyful reconciliations, drinking, feasting, debating and infighting, the family is rallied up and assembled. Mostly, as turns out in the end, consisting of the first generation of expatriates who were in their 80s at the time the story takes place. And together they board the train that takes them back to their lost homeland. As they traverse the labyrinthine railway networks and approach the Ukrainian border, more families join in – both living and dead – sharing their traumatic narratives and infusing the journey with carnivalesque energy.

Meanwhile, their Silesian settlement, the apartment building, falls victim to the forces of modernity, as communal gardens make way for the construction site of a new parking lot. All the ants and other fauna from nearby garden plots rush into the apartment building taking everything apart. Local drunkards join in and they dismantle the building and everything that was in it.

29:19

The journey itself becomes open ended. As the ghost train enters Western Ukraine its passengers depart, uncertain of what the future will bring. The summary does not give justice to the book's complex layering of themes and motifs that touch on various aspects of the generational shift, community identity, and collective memory. Nonetheless, I would like to point out three aspects of the text that correspond to the features of adventure romance that, I hope, illustrate how the text uses the form to intervene in the discourse of cultural memory.

30:13

So the hero, the grandson, as the protagonist is rather passive and underdeveloped, even though, as we are told, he is occasionally capable of heroic deeds, such as getting up at 10am in the morning to go to his grandma's place for breakfast. As such, the characterization is not unusual. That is, an inept hero is indeed one of the most notorious figures in adventure literature. Which is largely because in adventure romance, the true conflict takes place between two polarly opposed cosmic forces that are more often than not of spatial and temporal order, rather than psychological one. So, modernity and tradition, civilization and barbarity, the natural world and the corrupted human world and so forth. The world of romance is a fairly polarized one, and its heroes, to quote Frederick Jameson, "show a naivete and bewilderment that marks them, rather, as normal spectators surprised by supernatural conflict into which they are unwittingly

thrown, reaping the rewards of cosmic victory without ever having quite been aware of what was at stake in the first place. A registering apparatus rather than an actor."

This is a perfect recharacterization of the grandson, who does not even seem to have a strong sense of identity outside of his role within the family. He's referred to as the grandson and this is all we know about him, pretty much. At the same time, his irresoluteness and lack of clearly defined self-code, we might even say arrested development, making a model representative of what Marianne Hirsch calls degeneration of post memory. Even though, interestingly, he belongs to the third gender rather than second generation, which is a very peculiar choice on the author's part because there is really no mention of the second generation at all. That is the protagonist is a grandson, not a son.

32:34

His inability to find his sense of identity outside of the traditional world of his elders and their remembrance of things past, thus signals a deeply felt, if not always consciously realized, connection with the family's collective trauma. His ties with his grandmother's generation, combined with his still relatively young age, thus make him a crucial link in the cross-generational transmission of memory. In that sense, putting history to rest by undertaking the journey to the lost homeland may be read as a belated rite of passage on the road to adulthood.

33:19

If the binary opposition is indeed the organizing principle of adventure romance, then we may proceed to ask what worlds or cosmic forces are in conflict in *Twelve Stations*. It is not too difficult to identify two sacred spaces within this text. The first one is Kamienica, the apartment building occupied by the hero's family. That is, the elderly first generation expatriates. And as the narrator knows, quote, "Here, enlightenment and civilization barely glimmered. Here, the benighted people still prefer to meet and converse rather than watch television. Here, the center of the family was its oldest member, holidays were sacred, and sacred were the dinners made by Babcia. Here, the fashions of the world were rarely endorsed in full."

34:12

Kamienica is modeled on the estate of Soplicowo in Adam Mickiewicz's 19th century romantic epic *Pan Tadeusz* as the center of an ordered cosmos, the place where humans live with nature and each other in near perfect harmony. The second sacred space, which is the holy grail of the quest, the parish church in Gliniany, onto which the elderly expatriates project all of their nostalgic sentiments, and a sense of historic mission. These two generative spaces, one real and tangible, the other virtual, stand for stability, continuity and strong communal identity, and as such are sharply contrasted with spaces that either belong to the present historical moment, like the rapidly modernizing Poland and the city of Opole, which is kind of a stand in for Poland at large, referred to as the city of one hundred banks and one bookstore, or the nightmarishly tangled web of railway tracks that spread between the Silesia region and western Ukraine. A railway network that invokes the trauma of forced resettlements and other terroristic logical and totalitarian modernity unleashed on, what Timothy Snyder called, the bloodlands.

35:42

Importantly, however, rather than set the conflict between here and now and that exoticized elsewhere, which also often forms the spatial system of coordinates for romance narratives, Różycki draws our attention to the temporal aspects of this conflict. Namely, between places and people that retain memory of the past and those that do not. In doing so, he highlights the necessary interdependence between cultural identity formation and forces, real or imaginary, that work to undermine it. In other words,

cultural identity, just like cultural memory, is always a dynamic process rather than a static repository of individual and collective values, symbols and experiences.

36:33

And finally, the third aspect of adventure romance in *Twelve Stations* that I would like to look at is the quest itself. And here what Różycki does is quite interesting. On the one hand, the prosaic, grotesque and humorous aspects of the journey constantly undermine the epic tone of storytelling, which generates a lot of humor and irony in this work. After all, it's a story about a group of eccentric, elderly family members of the protagonist trying to visit a town in Ukraine. But on the other hand, the characters and events still perform their functional role in the narrative. The traumatic stories of broken lives and divided families interlaced in the narrative never allow us to dismiss it as sheer farce, that is, even if rendered ironically, the romance quest still functions as the quest in romance narratives.

37:45

To give one example, one of the most consistent characteristics of the expatriate community is their sedentary lifestyle. And this is something that not only Różycki mentions, but many other contemporary Polish authors who have Eastern expatriates as their family members, note how reluctant they are to move anywhere from their place. Having been forcibly expelled from their homes, loaded onto cattle wagons with all their belongings, losing most of those belongings on the way and forced to piece together new lives, not only made them hopelessly fixated on their memories, traditions and values (a phenomenon that many emigre communities also experience), but also made them almost neurotically averse to travel, let alone on a train. So, in that sense, undertaking this fantastic journey, trivial as it may seem in real terms, is therefore nothing short of heroic for the older generation of expatriates as it effectively makes them recreate a 50-year-old collective trauma, a new exodus and a new flight from the forces of entropy into a foreign land. So, in a way, the narrative reverses history here. Now, as they move back to their original homes, their former homes are being destroyed by natural forces and local drunkards, and they have to undertake yet another journey into the unknown.

39:32

Różycki's response to the challenge of traumatic memory and post-memory is to suggest a cyclicity of history, a desire to use mythical or romantic imagination to rebuild semantic continuity between the past, present and future. However, in the case of *Twelve Stations*, it is a repetition with a difference. The quest narrative restores the expatriates' collective agency, making their final journey a willful act. A means to reconstruct that historically distorted collective identity and at the same time, offer their descendants, embodied by the figure of the grandson, a way to connect with their family's past. So in this case, the distinction being that they actually, together as a community choose to undertake this journey, which, on the one hand, forces them to deal with the past, but at the same time does not strip them away from the heroic qualities which were bestowed on them by the official propaganda in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

40:45

I brought the title of my talk, from Tomasz Różycki's poem "Scorched Maps" from his 2006 volume *Colonies*. The poem can be read as a kind of coda to *Twelve Stations* or perhaps another variation on the same theme of maintaining individual and collective memory. He gives a brief account of a trip to present day Ukraine where he discovers that those he loved had disappeared below the ground, deeper than decades of ants, and the search for the lost homeland generates only further estrangement. In the context of this post-memorial quest to revisit the buried past, we may conceive of the source maps from the

poem's title, as material and mental remains of spaces, communities and identities that have been uprooted by history.

41:51

Yet, the fact that the poem appears in a collection of radically touted colonies, among other poetic meditations on the ambiguous lore of exotic spaces, reminds that fragmentary, incomplete and sketch maps have always been thin fantasies of adventure. Their blank spaces and missing fragments enticed countless would-be adventurers with the promise of discovery, wonder and a renewed sense of self. Thus, even scorched maps issue an invitation, a call to adventure, even if the quest itself remains unresolved.

And as I want to suggest here, even necessarily failed and open-ended quests have the constructive power of translating collective experiences, memories and affects into a broader cultural memory. The case of Różycki's work shows that adventure as a form of experiencing and as a textual medium, not only may play an important part in the process of cultural memory production, but, thanks to its capacity of symbolically resolving real conflicts, may harmonize various often contradictory versions of that memory. And while doing so offers us yet another engrossing narrative.

43:14

Thank you.