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Cathartic Paths of the Gothic in *Ciemno, prawie noc* by Joanna Bator

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to investigate how the Gothic is employed in Joanna Bator's novel *Ciemno, prawie noc* [*Dark, Almost Night*]. I frame my analysis on the author's assertion that "Poland is a horror," exploring firstly how the Gothic serves as an aesthetic framework that intertwines different time periods and family histories within the narrative. Secondly, I examine its role in grounding these temporal layers within the specific geographical location of Wałbrzych, which itself assumes a villain-like presence in the novel. I argue that Bator adapts the Gothic tradition for cathartic purposes, particularly in narrating transgenerational traumas. This approach enables the expression and understanding of a fractured past, potentially fostering a process of healing.

Keywords: Joanna Bator, the Gothic, new urban Gothic, trauma, catharsis.

INTRODUCTION

Kinga Dunin, a critic of contemporary Polish literature, begins her review of Joanna Bator's novel, *Ciemno, prawie noc* [*Dark, Almost Night*], with a question: "Does the convention of a Gothic novel fit a book about contemporary Poland? Perfectly. Because Poland is a horror" (translation mine). This assessment is a direct quote from the author herself: "According to Joanna Bator, one of our most talented novelists, contemporary Poland can only be described as a horror" (translation mine), reads the opening of Przemysław Czapliński's review of the novel. According to Dunin, the horror of contemporary Poland consists of a plethora of "Polish fears" which she outlines as familial, historical and political. However, if fear is defined as an intense emotional response to perceived threats of danger, accompanied by a sense of anxiety, it seems more appropriate to say that what makes Bator's story Gothic is the way it deals not so much with fears—as these come from factual but also imagined threats—but with real-life horrors in the spheres Dunin has outlined.

Firstly, Poland is a horror on the level of the family. Families are depicted in Bator's novel as traumatized by past horrors, as destroyed by drink, abuse, crime, and the consequences of social erosion. Hidden from public view and happening behind closed doors, family horrors do not transpire in the novel as direct accounts of traumatized victims or eye-witnesses, but as scraps of memories, altered by the passage of time, extracted by the narrator who gathers various stories and pieces of information from different sources within the narrative. Secondly, Poland is a horror because of the atrocities which took place on its territories during WWII. The memory of these psychologically devastating events haunts individual characters and affects families and whole communities. This is the case with the narrator's mother, whose untreated and therefore unhealed exposure to wartime crimes leads to the dysfunction of the whole family. At the community level, many of the region's inhabitants exhibit latent symptoms of transgenerational trauma stemming from past uprootedness, relocations, and expatriations, but some are also affected by the awareness of the massive scale of wartime crimes committed on the land they now call home. In all these cases, trying to reconstruct the past is difficult: recollections are unreliable, memory fails, some people do not want to return to the past. But the past intrudes into the present and demands to be told. Finally, the novel offers an insight into the horrors of the post-communist period of transformation from communism to free-market economy in Poland, a limbo-zone for the majority of the region's inhabitants, which resulted in high levels of unemployment and crime, and in the deprivation of entire neighbourhoods.

The novel begins when a journalist, Alicja Tabor, is sent from Warsaw to her hometown of Wałbrzych to do reportage on the unsolved cases of three missing children. She leaves behind her recently gained security and comfort, and undertakes an unsettling return home to carry out a journalistic investigation away from the capital, in a border town close to Germany. In this way the opening of the novel follows what Victor Sage has identified as a "paradigm of the horror-plot: the journey from the capital to the provinces" (8). The task becomes emotionally charged because Alicja returns to her desolate family home for the first time after fifteen years of absence, and, as she resettles in her bedroom, childhood memories start flooding back; weird events that she remembers but never understood and shreds of mysteries from her family's past vie for attention as they, too, demand her investigation. The novel is structured on these two intertwining plot lines: while investigating the mystery of the missing children, Alicja pieces together her family's history and finds that both are tightly bound up with the troubled past of this border region.

Published in 2012, *Ciemno, prawie noc* received Poland's most prestigious literary award, the Nike Prize, in 2013, and was branded as "a thriller drawing on the conventions of the Gothic novel" ("Nagroda Literacka," translation mine). Although its structure has many affinities with a detective story with elements of a psychological novel, it is most heavily, and very knowingly, indebted to Gothic tradition interlaced with elements of horror in both of its plot lines. The Gothic mode plays a triple role in the novel. Firstly, it is the aesthetic framework that allows the author to marry different time spans and family histories. Since it invites the evocation of the expected range of emotions, the Gothic allows the narrative to meander between the fragmented past and the mysteries of the present, and to effectively convey horrors of the social consequences of economic and political transformations of the early 2000s in Poland. The Gothic provides Bator with language, imagery and metaphors to reconstruct the precarious situation of unprotected civilians and the end of WWII, and to depict the social consequences of the directionless, post-industrial transition period following the fall of communism. Secondly, since Gothic aesthetics rely on a prescribed set of technical conventions—such as the castle, a haunted house, the forest, underground labyrinths, ghosts and revenants—they are used in the novel as an effective tool to anchor the two time spans in a specific geographical location, in a very real topography of a city and its vicinities which house the memory of the past and remain its silent living reservoirs. As in many classic Gothic novels, location—here the city of Wałbrzych with its troubled multicultural history—becomes a character in its own right, a dormant ghost which does not allow the past to be

forgotten, but is also a medium through which catharsis, reconciliation and healing are possible. Moreover, whether dealing with secret wartime crimes, or exploring the dark aspects of present-day reality in Poland, Bator uses the Gothic mode to grapple with problems of an ethical nature. Because of its potential for horror and prescribed departure from realism, the Gothic has, since its literary inception, been used not only as a vehicle to explore and expose the nature of evil, but most importantly as "the force that returns us to the status quo" (Punter, "Introduction" 7), provided that the status quo refers to a world where human decency and morality prevail—a world spared from ethical transgressions and horrors of Gothic provenance. The Gothic, therefore, disrupts normality but, in line with the early Gothic novels, which all "end well," it also has the capacity to heal:

> [I]t is precisely in Gothic that the whole issue of catharsis becomes focused to its most intense point, where the possibility of being "healed" by surviving atrocious experience is perpetually challenged by the alternative possibility of being overwhelmed by that experience and swept off, like so many Gothic heroes, into the abyss, far away from any available map or compass. (Punter, "Introduction" 7)

I suggest that Bator's novel demonstrates that, despite past and present atrocities, catharsis and healing are possible.

POST-INDUSTRIAL, POST-TRANSFORMATIONAL GOTHIC

The Gothic mode is firmly anchored in the setting. From its inception, the delineation of defenceless Gothic heroines was charted using spatial paraphernalia, which enhanced their sense of isolation, intimidation and mental confinement, and were synonymous with the villainy of their oppressors. With economic and demographic changes and the transfer of Gothic settings from aristocratic strongholds in the countryside to the cities, these classic Gothic tropes morphed to absorb the obscurities of dark alleys, urban squalor and decay. "The relocation of the Gothic in the modern city," Robert Mighall reminds us, "involved the city itself, or at least part of it, being Gothicized" (*A Geography* 31). When the critic called Charles Dickens a Gothic writer—the greatest "in the history of the Gothic during its supposed sabbatical"—he justified his claim saying that it was Dickens who transferred the Gothic to the contemporary urban landscape of Victorian England whilst still staying in tune with its original obsessions "with the historical past and how this affects the present," with its emphasis "on unwelcome vestiges from the past" (Mighall, "Dickens" 82).

Avoiding any comparisons between the two writers, I suggest that Bator similarly successfully claims the Gothic as a mode suitable for contemporary Polish literature to convey the horror of individuals trapped in the turmoil of history's turning points. Bator's novel gothicizes Wałbrzych for literary effects, though the city and its vicinities have many features of an inherently Gothic setting, beginning with its landmark and most iconic Gothic trope: the grand medieval castle of Książ dominating its skyline.

Solving the mystery of the disappearance of the children takes Alicja to the neglected sections of the city, where squalor and misery chart a story of the aftermath of political and economic transformations. Once a coal mining hub of the region and the second largest centre of mining industry in communist Poland, in the early 1990s the city experienced a rapid decline when its five mines were closed down and over 50% of the city's population lost their jobs. Within a few years, from a prosperous mining centre bustling with life, Wałbrzych turned into a forgotten border ghost town, following the path of other industrial regions in this part of Europe, where long-anticipated political changes accelerated the transition to the post-industrial era, the brutality and rapidity of which no one expected. Before the economic potential of the city could be redefined, for the majority of its inhabitants the years following the so-called "transformation" of 1989 meant unemployment, inertia and poverty. The ghostliness of the neglected industrial sections of the city, coupled with the debilitating deprivation of the ex-miners' living quarters constitute the novel's contemporary Gothic web, its post-industrial, post-communist new urban Gothic setting. These passages of the novel abound with descriptions of urban landscapes that have been "so soaked with inequality and toxicity as to become 'anti-landscapes,'" with outsiders and newcomers such as Alicja, rather than the apathetic inhabitants, responding to them with "dread, foreboding and aversion" (Millette 2).

While the late-Victorian urban Gothic emphasized "the alienation engendered by the metropolis," depicted "living conditions of the industrialized city—the unlit streets, factories, overcrowded dwellings, and proliferation of vice and crime," all by-products of a culture formed by capitalist dynamics of industrial expansion (Alder 704–05), new urban Gothic focuses on its aftermath: stagnation and decay caused by deindustrialization. The urban Gothic of the 19th century captured the consequences of the cities' expanding populations and overcrowding, and attributed degeneration and social injustice to the effects of unregulated growth. By contrast, in Bator's post-industrial novel, the new urban anti-cityscape emerges as one of unregulated decline, desolation and emptiness rather than expansion, unemployment and idleness rather than exhaustion

caused by overworking. Bator digests these post-industrial flavours, depicting a region in which precipitous economic decline drives many frustrated inhabitants to seek various risky jobs, such as bootleg mining and smuggling. Lack of regular employment, a power vacuum, collapsing social structures and the birth of makeshift free market economy create a fertile ground for the flourishing of crime. The locals, however, harbour a suspicion that their current economic malaise, culminating in the disappearances of their children, is due to their underprivileged social position:

> It never rains but it pours for the poor. . . . Nobody cares about us. Everyone just ignores us. . . . There are those who would poison us like cockroaches. They would burn us out. . . . How can I know who? what do I know? Politicians, the rich . . ., the newcomers. It didn't use to be like that . . . But they got rich, so they come, poison the water, poison the air, they prey on people, they suck our blood, I know what I'm saying. Black water, horrible water, black hair in tap water. Chinese hair in Polish water. Chinese chemicals in Polish milk. . . . it's about some force that is against us. Very harmful. Hateful to us. . . . To us, to Polish mothers. (Bator 106–07)[1]

Evil takes the undefinable form of the hateful Other who is blamed for unemployment, for shutting down local businesses and for the invasion of super- and hypermarkets flooded with cheap textiles, industrial food and Made-in-China goods, seen as the epitome of the new era. Applying convoluted logic that even its followers cannot fully comprehend, the underprivileged blame "the rich," "the powerful" and "the Chinese" for being the malefactors responsible for pollution, the economic collapse of the region, the closure of local coal mines, and the ruin of the local industry. The Other in all shapes and guises threatens the wellbeing of the region and looms large in the stories Alicja collects as she interviews the locals. In their view, all evil resides in the moneyed Other who is home-bred for some, and foreign for others. For the elderly who remember the post-war years, the Other takes the form of a fraudulent Jew who cheated them out of their gold coins. For some, the Other lies in wait just across the border with Germany. Yet, for many, the Other materializes as "a Gypsy gang" accused of kidnapping their children (Bator 52).

As she traverses the derelict parts of the city, Alicja realizes they are the residues not only of poverty but also of crime bred by the consequences of the post-communist U-turn. The economic situation of this region harbours

[1] Joanna Bator's *Ciemno, prawie noc* has not been translated into English. All the quotations from the novel are mine.

a truly Gothic liminal territory: post-communist and post-industrial but without a clearly defined direction for development. Coal mines closed down, and with them went many shops, restaurants, and most of the cultural institutions previously supported by the state. This shift opened the door not only to new pastimes in the loud and flashy supermarkets selling inedible but cheap food-like products, but also to new cults, such as the rise of a new prophet, Jan Kołek. Bator's novel provides a subversive social commentary by capturing the locals' sentiments of nostalgia for the "good old communist days" amidst the decay and malaise paralyzing their city. They reminisce about a time when industry thrived and everyone had a job, viewing memories of smoke belching from the chimneys and soot accumulating on the brick walls of their tenement houses as metaphors for the city's former prosperity. Though they live in the present, the unemployed inhabitants of the city's run-down quarters belong to the past.

On the train, as she nears her hometown after years of absence, Alicja encounters visible physical symptoms of the chasm between the capital she is coming from and the economic vulnerability of the region she grew up in. The countenances of the people around her set the tone of despondency and become embodiments of the death of the previous era. Their deteriorating physiques epitomize their social demise and in a way justify their nostalgia for the communist past which is equated in their memories with material stability. Their appearance and their material deprivation turn them into almost Gothic monstrosities. Alicja observes: "[P]enury sounds the same everywhere, and one of its noises is the sucking up of the remains of food from the cavities, from under the badly made dental caps" (Bator 9). Deprivation acquires physical features and its formidable ubiquity debilitates and devours the characters. Destitution muzzles their bodies, dominates the smells of their dwellings with "the odour of mildew and decomposition" (19).

EVOKING THE SHADOWS OF THE PAST

A completely different residue of the Gothic is connected with the past, encapsulating the history of the narrator's family. When Alicja returns to an empty home, with all her family members long deceased, the objects around her evoke memories of her childhood. She realizes that these unused household items have preserved the past, linking her to her childhood and triggering the awakening of memories. This return inevitably plunges her into the secretive web of her family's past through her own fragmented memories, which begin to haunt her with every glance at a familiar yet long-forgotten object. Over the years, she has internalized the past she

now, initially involuntarily, revisits. This past has been distorted by her reinterpretation of the events that she experienced or witnessed as a child.

David Punter reminds us: "Everything to a small child is 'supernatural'; everything is natural. Everything is assumed; nothing is explicable. Infancy is a Gothic condition" ("On the Threshold" 305). But the Gothic state of infancy, the state of not knowing, is also connected with curiosity, and that is the state that homecoming awakens in Alicja. She succumbs to her childhood memories, to a state of childlike inquisitiveness and exploration. As she unravels her family secrets, the intimate family story expands, situating the past within a larger canvas of the history of her city, region, country, and beyond.

Exploring her family's past forces Alicja to confront the silenced truths about civilian life at the end of WWII, when the defeated Nazis were retreating and the advancing Soviets were replacing them as occupiers of Poland. As she pieces together fragments of accounts from her family's friend and reflects on her own disjointed childhood memories of events she could not fully comprehend, she gains an opportunity not only to understand the enduring horrors of the past, which manifest as devastating psychological generational trauma, but also to delve deeper and learn history beyond the textbooks. She uncovers undocumented facts censored by communist authorities and stories silenced throughout the post-war decades when Poland was in the Soviet-dominated communist bloc. In the aftermath of the war, the horrific events witnessed or experienced by civilians as the Red Army marched west were stored in the memories of the survivors. Despite being widely known, these events were seldom acknowledged and thus rarely entered official records. During the communist era, post-war Soviet crimes were a taboo topic.

Joanna Bator's novel is one of the first attempts in contemporary Polish literature to address the atrocities experienced by women at the hands of Soviet soldiers.[2] She adopts the Gothic as a language to convey both the haunting consequences of these past horrors and the impossibility of reconstructing events which happened decades ago. The Gothic, with its reliance on ambivalence, ambiguity, and perplexity, effectively captures events from the past that underwent natural processes of subconscious emotional transformation and distortion, as well as enforced silencing and eradication in official historical discourse. The Gothic, with its capacity "to tell a 'different' story" resurfaces in Bator's novel to assimilate the past and "emerges as the challenger to all the biased histories" (Punter, "On the Threshold" 304).

[2] Since the publication of *Ciemno, prawie noc* in 2012, other novels addressing this unacknowledged aspect of history have been published. The novels which explore atrocities perpetrated on women during and after WWII include, among others: *Kolonia Marusia* (2016) by Sylwia Zientek, *Nieczułość* by Martyna Bunda (2017), *Toń* by Ishbel Szatrawska (2023).

Alicja's family history is intertwined with the political changes that occurred after WWII, when, following the Potsdam Conference, the borders of Poland and Germany were significantly redrawn. To compensate for the loss of its eastern territories to the Soviet Union, Poland incorporated German territories in the east, known as the Regained or Recovered Territories. The shift of its western borders was portrayed in post-war communist propaganda as a righteous move, a morally justified form of retribution against the German people for the atrocities of war. It was greeted with applause, and also justified for historical reasons, as these territories were considered native Polish lands, and therefore officially declared to have been rightfully returned to the Polish homeland. However, for the thousands of people inhabiting these territories, it was much more than a cartographic move. This decision led to massive population shifts: over one million Poles were forced to relocate from the eastern territories that Poland lost to the Soviets, and approximately eight million Germans were expelled from their homes in the territories that became part of western Poland after the war (Eigler 2).

The daily existence of the large numbers of people traumatized by six years of total war, dispossessed, and then relocated from the east to the west of the country, was a profound challenge. They had to build new lives in houses which had only recently been hastily abandoned by their former owners, furnished with German objects and equipped with utensils bearing German inscriptions, which, in the minds of the newcomers, were associated with Nazism, war, and death. "Houses were post-German, public buildings, factories, roads, churches, cemeteries, objects of everyday use: dressers and wardrobes, tables and chairs, plates and crockery, clothes, paintings on the walls, and preserves in the cellars. . . . In one word: everything" (Kuszyk 8, translation mine). With time, however, as the newcomers from the east settled in and rebuilt their lives, the post-Germanness of their everyday existence became assimilated and familiarized. Many of them, still grappling with the unacknowledged traumas of the recently ended war, adopted survival strategies that dictated they not focus on the emotional effects of living in other people's homes, among other people's objects, or sleeping in other people's beds, but rather move on and continue living. Nevertheless, this created a haunting Gothic effect of the lingering and inerasable material presence of the former inhabitants, who were, after all, wartime enemies. They were now perceived as malevolent spirits—individuals no longer physically present but whose existence was felt everywhere, in the consciousness of the new inhabitants and in the memories of the elderly:

> This district, stretching acrosss Parkowa Góra and Niedźwiadki, was originally built as a luxurious and modern part of Wałbrzych, but after the war, it fell into disrepair. One of the most beautifully situated and interestingly designed housing estates that Poland acquired second-hand was slowly becoming a slum. Yet, Nowe Miasto still retained the charm of a wasted body stretched over nobly formed bones. People fled from here in an incomprehensible rush to the terrifying prefabricated blocks of flats, as if the ghosts of the previous owners had driven them away from these beautiful houses. (Bator 93)

When Alicja enters her house the night she arrives, objects immediately bring back memories from her childhood: "Tiled stoves, double-glazed windows sealed with cotton wool for the winter, and wooden floors full of cracks, from which I used to pick out post-German needles, buttons, nails and hairs" (20). She remembers her sister frowning at these discoveries: "'You've dug up a German from the floor again, silly'" (ibid.). "Crack, grave, dirt" are the words that wake her up on the first morning at her family home, at the bottom of Książ Castle (ibid.).

Digging into her family's past, Alicja uncovers scraps of details about her mother's childhood spent in Wałbrzych during the final months of the war. She used to hide in the forest surrounding Książ Castle, in the vicinity of which the Nazis had established a labour camp for prisoners from the Gross-Rosen concentration camp. Their presence there was top secret, and information about them leaked to the locals in the form of scraps of distorted stories passed on by word of mouth. Alicja's family friend remembers that

> [t]he bravest whispered about what was going on in Książ Castle, about the underground laboratories created for medical experiments, where German scientists used prisoners from the Gross-Rosen camp. They might have needed a child and decided that a German girl could be sacrificed for the glory of the Third Reich. . . . that's what the castle's scullery maids gossiped in the kitchen . . . "blood oozes from underground." (157)

REPRESENTATIONS OF TRAUMA

Alicja learns that their mother's true name was Rosemarie and she was a German orphan. As the war drew to a close, the retreating Nazis were replaced by advancing Soviets, creating a period of chaos and power vacuum, with hundreds of soldiers stationed in the territories inhabited by unprotected civilians. During this tumultuous time, Alicja's mother, a German-speaking

orphan girl, was left entirely on her own when the Soviets arrived and took over the castle in the months following the war. When she was found after the retreat of "the red plague" (Bator 286) in one of the devastated chambers, "[s]he was about eight years old and didn't speak any language. She could only scream. She was naked, her whole body was covered in dry blood and scabs that left her with scars. I am not sure if anyone attempted to help her, after the war people thought that everyone had gone through something dreadful" (225). Alicja's mother was subsequently taken to an orphanage, given a new identity as Anna Lipiec, and only years later regained her ability to speak. The narrator's older sister remembered that she "spoke Polish, but in a very strange way, as if this language was merely a cover for some other one, hidden underneath" (226).

Their mother never fully recovered from the physical abuse and emotional wounds inflicted by the Soviets; these traumas lingered for decades, secretly affecting the entire family. She had no language in which to understand or speak of the horrific violence inflicted upon her body as "the little German Hitler's whore" (287). Although she survived the war and recovered physically, as Cathy Caruth reminds us, "the history of survival . . . takes the form of an unending confrontation with the returning violence of the past" (*Unclaimed* 69). The abuse Rosemarie endured at the hands of the Soviets turned her into a silent, undercover bedroom monster. Because her body had become a site of a cruel post-war revenge, she perpetuated this pattern on her own daughters. As a child, Alicja repeatedly saw blood-stained knives and her sister covered in cuts. She recalls her mother screaming abusive words in both Polish and German. "Fear was our brother," as her sister explained in a letter Alicja retrieved years later (Bator 231).

When Alicja returns to Wałbrzych as an adult woman, she gathers more facts about her family's past and pieces them together, gradually uncovering a cohesive narrative. In a process fraught with Gothic uncertainties and horrors, she explores her mother's morbid psychology through her own distorted recollections and fragmented accounts from an elderly neighbour. Through this journey, she constructs a portrait of a family haunted by a cycle of abuse and generational trauma, culminating in her sister's suicide, her mother's confinement in a mental hospital, and her own emotional detachment and inability to form stable relationships. Alicja's mother exemplified psychiatric symptoms of PTSD, which refers to "a response to an event 'outside the range of usual human experience'" (Caruth, "Introduction" 3). Often, this response is delayed and manifests as "repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event" (ibid.). The American Psychological Association identified several groups of symptoms resulting from trauma exposure,

such as re-experiencing symptoms: flashbacks and reliving the trauma as if it were occurring in the present (McNally 9). Later, sexual abuse in childhood was recognized as a causal factor and added to the list of stressors causing PTSD, with the victim's inability to recall the event considered a symptom of the traumatic disorder (8). These symptoms arise because the traumatic event is "not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it" (Caruth, "Introduction" 4). This was the case with Rosemarie, when decades later, the sexual abuse she experienced resurfaced, and "from a damaged girl grew a woman who destroyed everything," especially her own daughters, whom she subjected to the same violence she had endured (Bator 291). When the narrator's older sister, Ewa, ultimately wounded her mother in a fight to prevent further harm to them, resulting in their mother's permanent confinement in a mental asylum, her greatest trauma was the persistence of her fear. Ewa recognized that she had been irreversibly damaged, as a part of her mother remained within her like a parasitic presence, *kotojady*, "cateaters," the term she coined to describe the evil forces which eventually destroyed her, causing her to commit suicide.

Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok posit that "what haunts us are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others" (171). They argue that individuals may manifest symptoms derived not from their own life experiences, but from the traumas or undisclosed secrets of their parents or ancestors. Abraham introduces the concepts of "phantom," "haunting," and "phantasmatic haunting," employing the Gothic rhetoric of ghosts to suggest an alien presence within the self (170–76). In Bator's novel, this is manifested in the imagined haunting experienced by the second generation. One of the coping mechanisms that Alicja's sister, Ewa, developed for dealing with their abusive mother was playfully tormenting her sister with stories about thousands of Jewish prisoners from Gross-Rosen who had been buried in the nearby forests and whom she imagined rising from the dead. During the war, the Nazis used them to construct underground tunnels, and it was well known that anyone sent to Książ from Gross-Rosen would inevitably perish. Stories of this distant past and supernatural occurrences fuelled Ewa's imagination. She lived with the awareness of past crimes and unmarked graves in the forests near their home, and repeated tales of an evil force thickening beneath the castle, causing hordes of semi-transparent figures to rise from the dead, emerge from the forest, crawl into houses, bang on the floors, and creep into the cellars of the post-German houses in their residential area (Bator 87).

Rosemarie's individual tragedy resonates with the history of an entire generation of abused wartime victims, whose traumas were exacerbated

both by the displacements caused by border shifts and the political upheavals of the post-war era. Paul Ricœur defines collective trauma as a wounded collective memory. He argues that while individual trauma is often caused by personal loss, collective wounds may result from the loss of territory or painful experiences endured by entire communities (78). These may fall into the category of generational trauma, although the term was originally developed to deal with the descendants of Holocaust survivors. The wartime wounds endured by individuals like Rosemarie, never worked through and therefore passed on to the next generations, turn the inhabitants of Wałbrzych into unhealed victims, depicted in the novel as succumbing to what can be described as "victim culture." The narrator delves into the personal stories of the families of the missing children, all of whom are economically fragile and bear scars from the past, such as Barbara Mizera, who continues to blame a fraudulent Jew who deceived her grandmother when she resettled from central Poland to Wałbrzych. Individuals like her are part of a community that hurls abuse at one another in internet chat rooms and venerates the self-proclaimed prophet Jan Kołek. Some nurture wartime wounds inherited from their ancestors, while others attribute their social decline to the transformation period. In collective scenes, Bator portrays a community steeped in violence, populated by individuals who view the past—whether the distant wartime era or the more recent decade following the fall of communism—as a haunting curse, attributing their current struggles to external causes beyond their control.

One way in which this generational trauma surfaces in the novel is through the language used by some of the locals, reflecting the horrors embedded in their minds, expressive of past traumas, present-day disillusionments, and fears of an uncertain future. Their language is often disjointed, incoherent, composed of slogans, clichés, and laden with colloquialisms and vulgarities. It is a source of horror, which takes the form of a monstrous amalgamation of profanities and expressions of hatred, conveyed through torrents of abuse on the internet and outbursts of religious devotion at gatherings led by the local fraud-turned-prophet.

Following Roger Luckhurst, Susana Onega notices that "Western culture is dominated by the trauma paradigm" and is "full of more or less overt allusions to the unspeakable experiences and memories of victims of collective or individual traumas" (91). However, as Timothy Snyder points out, the history of Eastern Europe, especially in the context of WWII, differs significantly. Poland endured two occupations and two totalitarian regimes, suffering from wartime atrocities, post-war crimes, executions and deportations that remained unrecorded or openly admitted for

decades (Snyder 7–9). Many of the atrocities endured by Polish civilians were never officially acknowledged, and their traumas went unaddressed. Consequently, the legitimacy of their suffering was not recognized, and they were denied the right to victimhood. This denial constituted a double violation: first, at the hands of their oppressors, and second, through the imposed policy of denial and silence. These victims were deprived not only of the opportunity to process the effects of their trauma but also of the right to talk about their experiences, even in medical settings, leaving them to doubt the validity of their own suffering.

CATHARTIC POTENTIAL OF THE GOTHIC

Joanna Bator's *Ciemno, prawie noc* demonstrates that trauma is capable of perpetuating violence unless it is addressed. In "Remembering, Repeating and Working Through" (1914), Freud addresses the challenges of processing such blocked memories, highlighting the patient's compulsion to repeat the wounding action. He notes that "the patient repeats instead of remembering" (155). While the patient's illness should be approached "not as an event of the past, but as a present-day force, . . . as something real and contemporary," Freud emphasizes that therapeutic work should largely involve "tracing it back to the past" (151–52). In essence, for the process of healing to occur—which means breaking the cycle of repeating the traumatic actions—there must be a process of unearthing and remembering without "acting out." Otherwise, as Cathy Caruth aptly phrases it, the past events become an "unclaimed experience," resonating both personally and collectively (*Unclaimed*).

With the passage of time and the gradual blurring of details, in Bator's novel the Gothic helps uncover, convey and thus digest these obscured yet never forgotten past events. "Gothic reminds us of the uncertainties of history, that history is only, really, documentation, and, simultaneously, that most if not all documentation is forged" (Punter, "On the Threshold" 304). The process of collecting stories and uncovering the truth about Alicja's family's past is intertwined with the debunking of historical falsehoods. For the protagonist, this journey destabilizes her sense of identity and belonging. Bator challenges the assumption of the homogeneity of Polish identity by revealing its falsity when Alicja discovers she is actually half-German, while her neighbour, Albert Kukułka, is of mixed German and Roma descent, and Zofia Socha, the grandmother of a missing child, is a Jewish survivor "hiding from herself," who concealed her heritage out of fear, settling in a district ironically referred to by the locals as "Palestine" (Bator 181). *Ciemno,*

prawie noc follows the Gothic narrative pattern to resurrect a haunting past that cannot be suppressed or silenced indefinitely. In this sense, as David Punter reminds us, the Gothic "might have a truly distinctive role to play in this gradual exposure of the falsity of history" ("On the Threshold" 304). However, echoing the experience of Holocaust survivors and victims of other war crimes, Cathy Caruth posits that "perhaps it is not possible for the witnessing of the trauma to occur within the individual at all, it may only be in future generations that 'cure' or at least witnessing can take place" (*Unclaimed* 136). And this is precisely what the novel's ending provides: for Alicja's mother and her victim, Ewa, her own daughter, there is no cure. Instead, it comes for Alicja, the younger sister, who chooses to adopt one of the recovered children, Kalinka, who, like Alicja herself, is an orphan. The novel concludes with the two of them walking hand in hand, suggesting a reconciliatory path to healing for both.

The healing potential of the subversive Gothic layer of the novel permeates the narrative through its depiction of social outcasts, referred to as *babcyjki*. These figures are portrayed as enigmatic, witch-like women who are devoted to cats and appear as though they have stepped straight out of a Gothic narrative. They possess a profound knowledge of regional mysteries, have an uncanny ability to sense evil and appear whenever someone is in need of assistance. Throughout the novel, they save Albert and provide aid to Ewa and Alicja. Timeless, altruistic, and involuntary, these characters demonstrate that the potential for goodness resides in the hidden corners of reality.

The Gothic genre fragments and splinters reality, unsettling it by summoning ghosts from closets and the recesses of our memories. It disrupts our sense of belonging by rendering the familiar unfamiliar, making the home unhomely, creating a space where belonging and not-belonging converge, prompting a questioning of identity and an awareness of its fragility. However, in doing so, the Gothic can be viewed as a reconciliatory practice, providing a language to confront the ghosts of the past that must be addressed in order to facilitate individual and communal healing. In Joanna Bator's novel, the Gothic serves as an aesthetic form and a language to articulate the unspeakable and unclaimed past, which the author retrieves from the past of her characters, just as Alicja retrieves a letter written by her sister from a copy of M. G. Lewis's *The Monk*. Despite, or perhaps thanks to, the unspeakable horrors and incestuous crimes they depict, both novels, in the vein of classic Gothic, create a territory for catharsis and provide a resolution imbued with healing, eschewing an apocalyptic vision of a world devoid of hope.

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