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THE COUNT AND THE HORSE: PERCEPTIONS OF POLES IN ENGLISH CANADIAN LITERATURE

According to statistics, about 200,000 Poles live in Canada, while 800,000 state that Polish is their first language, not a very large number in a nation of over 33 million, considering that Toronto alone is now home to over a million Chinese. In a multicultural society, comprising virtually every nationality on earth from the Innu to the Tibetans, the Polish are largely unnoticed. They blend in with the rest of the Europeans, hard-working, nose-to-the ground people who mind their own business and do not cause much stir. Consequently they do not get much support from the Government when they voice their grievances, and do not get much funding. In large multi-ethnic cities where Poles mostly live, they are simply invisible.

On the other hand, in rural areas, be it Ontario, Quebec or the Prairies, Poles, like other foreigners stand out, since the rest of the population is either First Nations or the white English or French settlers. They stand out not because of the colour of their skin but by their accent, dress or behaviour. Rural people can tell a foreigner straight-away.

The two works of literature written by English Canadian writers in which Poles feature prominently are Margaret Atwood's novel *Lady Oracle* and Alice Munro's short story *Apples and Oranges*, and each of the two writers represents one the two perspectives: Atwood is an urban writer par excellence, while Munro is a country girl who still lives in rural Ontario. In both works, the Poles described belong to the wave of Second World War immigration, and they represent the Polish intelligentsia, the class unknown in Canada, which has a totally different class structure from Poland.

Three Polish Canadian names are meaningful to Canadians: Gzowski, Mynarski and, to a lesser extent, Zurakowski. Sir Casimir Gzowski was a Polish nobleman and an engineer who built one of the bridges over the Niagara River and was responsible for the creation of the Niagara Park.

Respected by Canadians and knighted by the Queen, he mingled with the mighty. His name was revived recently by one of his descendants, the late Peter Gzowski, one of the most popular broadcasters with the CBC.

Andrew Mynarski or Mlynarski was a farmer's son from the Prairies who fought as a pilot with the Canadian Air Force and saved his colleague from death in a burning plane rather than trying to save his own life. Mynarski was awarded the Victoria Cross for bravery posthumously, and is one of the most popular Canadian heroes of the Second World War.

Janusz Zurakowski, who died last year, was a Polish Air Force pilot, fighting along the RAF in Britain. After the war, he immigrated to Canada with his family and was involved with the construction and the testing of the famous Canadian super-jet the AVRO Arrow, which pre-dated the Concorde. There is a picture of the smiling Zurakowski carried on the shoulders of his co-workers with other pilots looking on after the successful completion of the test flight. It hangs in the Museum of Canadian Aviation in Ottawa and in many local aviation museums all over Canada. After the senseless scrapping of the AVRO Arrow project by the then Conservative Government of John Diefenbaker, Zurakowski, deeply disappointed, settled in the Kashuby area of Ontario. Together with his wife, they created a Polish centre in their lodge on Lake Kameniskeg and promoted the culture of the Polish Kashubs, the first Polish settlers in Canada.

The qualities which these men represented: nobility, bravery and heroism helped shape the image of this generation of Poles in Canada, and the two writers in question refer to this image, although each in a totally different way: Atwood ironically and Munro seriously.

Lady Oracle purports to be an autobiography of an aspiring young Canadian writer Joan Foster, who, recovering from her painful adolescence suffers for a plethora of complexes, the main one being obese. She looks for the roots of all her complexes in her beautiful, upwardly-mobile and perfectionist mother and her mostly absent father

Having undergone a slimming therapy, and thus remade herself, Joan boards a plane bound for London where she goes "to find herself." This will take the better part of her life, but, in the meantime, she finds a Polish count when falling off a bus and the count tells her she has the body of a goddess. Joan relates this seminal event as follows: "The Polish Count was an accident. I met him first when I fell off a double-decker bus near Trafalgar Square... The Polish Count happened to be passing by, and he picked me up." (p.141).

She goes on to describe the Count. "He was slightly shorter than I was, with wispy light-brown hair receding from his forehead, sloping shoulders and rimless spectacles, which were not fashionable at that time. He was wearing a navy-blue overcoat, a little frayed and shiny, and carrying a briefcase" (p.145). "Are you all right?" he asked in a vaguely English accent" (p.145).

On finding out that Joan had sprained her ankle, her new acquaintance takes her to a nearby restaurant and offers her tea and a tart. Looking at him close, Joan notices his aquiline nose and grayish green eyes. The nose seems to be a further indication of the man's nobility.

Not to waste any time, the Count proposes a joint excursion to the Tower of London by boat, and on this trip, he tells Joan the story of his life. He had always wanted to be a writer and he says: "I wished to be like Tolstoy… but now I am exiled from my own language, and this one is fit for nothing but to make hoardings with. It has no music, it does not sing, it is always trying to sell you something." (p. 147).

He also shows Joan his signet ring, which he wears on his little finger with the image of a bird or a griffin, Joan is not sure which. The ring presumably has a coat-of arms of his family. Joan says: "... he wasn't a count exactly, but he was something or other... The family had scrabbled along under the Germans, but when the Russians invaded, he knew he had to get out not to be shot. "Why? " I said. "You hadn't done anything." He gave me a pitying look. "It is not what you do... but who you are."(p.147).

The escape from Poland was not an easy one, with the borders closed and guarded. The Count and a party of six others had skied to the border, where a guide was to meet them and to take them across. But he became ill. He insisted that the party go on without him, and crawled into a cave, expecting to die. The others were caught at the border and executed. He recovered and made his own way across, traveling at night and taking the direction from the stars. When he first arrived in England, he washed dishes in Soho restaurants, but when he learned enough English, he got a position as a clerk in a bank, working in the foreign exchange department. He had a daughter as well as a mother in Poland, and worried that he had no son to bear his name.

Joan finds the whole story incomprehensible and, initially thinks that the Count is a compulsive liar like herself. Then she becomes impressed. She says: "He seemed to belong to a vanished and preferable era, where courage was possible". She feels sorry

for the Count, admires his daring, and is flattered by his attention which is not surprising, considering the difference in their ages: she is nineteen, he – forty one.

The Count next takes Joan to a club for Polish expatriates which to her appears to be ”full of one-eyed generals and other Polish counts” and to a chamber music concert, a benefit for some Polish organization that Joan had never heard before.

What follows is a liaison when Joan moves out of her hovel into the Count’s spacious apartment in South Kensington and becomes his mistress. She herself insists on the term mistress, as opposed to lover, the term reserved for her boyfriend Arthur. Her initiation into sex was not very satisfactory, and the Count is distressed when he realizes that he had unintentionally deflowered a virgin. He feels totally responsible for Joan and becomes both protective and possessive.

Joan, in turn, begins to see her protector, whose real name is Paul, as obsessive and pedantic, the traits she always hated in her mother. One day, she discovers a revolver in Paul’s drawer, which makes her fearful. She also discovers Paul’s secret: he writes pot-boiler romances under the pen name of Mavis Quilp. With the money from the royalties, he supports his mother and his daughter in Poland.

Confronted by Joan, Paul explains his choice of the pen-name: “This is a character from Dickens; it is a deformed, malicious dwarf. This is what I see myself to be in this country; I have been deprived of my stature, and I am filled with bitter thoughts” (p.155). Joan, who by now is beginning to chafe under Paul’s tutelage, and also needs money, takes a page from his book and decides to try her hand at writing pseudo-historical romances under the pen-name of Louise K. Delacourt, her aunt’s name. She soon becomes so successful that her books bring her more money than Paul makes, and he suggests that she pay part of the rent, as the apartment is expensive, the idea that she does not like.

The rift between Joan and Paul deepens when she meets Arthur, a young Canadian revolutionary looking for a cause. She becomes resentful of Paul viewing all North Americans as naive and does not share his pessimism about the fate of the world. She says contemptuously:”He pictured himself on horseback, with a sabre, charging against impossible odds” (p.159), repeating once again the old cliché about Polish cavalry charging German tanks.

Trying to justify her betrayal of Paul, Joan muses:”Ultimately our differences were: I believed in true love, he believed in wives and mistresses. I believed in happy endings, he in cataclysmic ones; I thought I was in love with him, he was old and cynical enough to know I wasn’t.” (Ibid). This is in preparation for taking off with Arthur without saying good bye to Paul. The allegedly cynical Paul obviously loved his young charge since he went to Canada to look for Joan years later and proposed marriage, romantic to the end. By then, she was married to Arthur and having an affair with a painter behind her husband’s back, without any love whatsoever for either man.

Are we talking about lack of understanding between the two protagonists? In this novel, it is total. Joan does not even try to understand Paul even though she protests love for him. They are people from different planets, who have little in common; their Weltanschauung is different: he is sceptical and disillusioned, she is youthfully optimistic, without self-doubt or scruples, the product of the new world. Does she learn anything from Paul? Most certainly not. But he is her first man and is seminal in making her into a future writer. Paul is not a lover but a mentor.

The portrayal of Paul in *Lady Oracle* is satirical which allows Margaret Atwood to rely on stereotypes rather than develop his character psychologically. She turns to the myth of a nobleman on horseback, a heroic and crazy Pole fighting for something or other, a

member of a foreign race, an exile in a foreign country. It is not a negative portrait, neither is it positive. Describing Paul as seen through Joan's eyes is an easy way out and it is justified by the ironic mode applied to all the characters in *Lady Oracle*. The characters however pay the price of this mode. Ultimately, it makes the heroine shallow and the Count – absurd.

The portrayal of a Pole in Alice Munro's *Apples and Oranges* in the collection *Friend of My Youth* is much more interesting, being both complex and ambiguous. The action takes place in a small rural Ontario town in the l950's, the milieu which Munro knows intimately. In this community, a foreigner sticks out a mile. Talking about a foreigner in another story within the collection, *Wigtime*, the narrator states: "Teresa was not vulgar – she was just foreign" and these words illustrate the indulgent but apprehensive attitude of the natives to the war bride from France.

The foreignness of Victor, the Polish protagonist of *Apples and Oranges* is noticeable even from a distance, and the population of the small town to which he moves never cease to wonder at his looks, his speech and his behaviour. The narrator, when introducing Victor, says as follows:"The first time Victor Sawicky came into store, he scattered the clerks... like a cat among the pigeons. They were gray-haired maiden ladies whom maidenhood had not kept from growing stout and bosomy. It was easy to imagine a clammy dew of alarm between those bosoms at the sight of Victor. One of the women came pattering up the ramp to Murray's little office to tell him that there was a foreigner and that none of them could make out what it was he wanted." (P. ll4).

It turned out that Victor wanted some work clothes, and that his English was quite understandable as he had spent several years in England, but his looks explained the panic of the clerks. "It was not the Polish accent that dismayed the clerks in Ziegler's store, it was Victor's looks. Murray put Victor immediately into the same class of human beings as Barbara, his wife but of the two he found Victor far the more splendid and disturbing... Victor drew his attention as a sleek and princely animal might-say, a golden palomino, bold but high-strung, shy about the stir he created. You'd try to say something soothing and deferential and stroke his shining neck, if he'd let you." (P.114).

Victor was very tall at six foot and five inches, light-boned and polished, with a pale-olive skin, dark blond hair and slightly protruding light blue eyes. His teeth were a prominent feature. "His teeth were large and stained, like his fingers, from nicotine .He smoked all the time." (Ibid). Victor's large yellow teeth fit in with the golden horse image perfectly.

Victor tells Murray, whom he has befriended that he and his English wife Beatrice had bought a farm on the edge of town on which they were going to keep horses and possibly start a riding school. Murray thinks this to be an impractical idea considering the smallness of the town, but Victor is enthusiastic about the project and about having come to Canada. He displays optimism and great curiosity about everything in his new country, asking Murray endless questions:"The winters – is it true that there is frost from October to May? Does the snow actually reach to the windowsills? Can one drink the well water without boiling, or is there a danger of catching typhoid fever? What kind of trees, cut down will provide the best heat in the stove?" (p. 115).

Murray is puzzled by the lack of boundary between the practical questions and the more general and personal ones because they all come mixed up altogether. Canadians never speak like that, never start a conversation without preliminaries and always stick to the topic. Victor simply blurts out whatever is on his mind at the time.

Victor, like the Count, has a colourful past. As a nineteen year old student in Warsaw in l939, Victor and a few friends took some Polish Air Force planes into the air and flew

them to Sweden. From Sweden, he went to England and joined the Polish Air Force, attached to the Royal Air Force. When he was shot down over France, Victor hid in the woods and ate raw potatoes from the fields. He was helped by the French Underground and made his way to the Spanish border. When he got back to England, he found that he would not be allowed to fly again because he knew too much, so he was sent on a secret mission to Turkey to help Poles and others, who were escaping through the Balkans.

Murray is inclined to believe Victor, but his wife, Barbara has serious doubts about this story, rather like Joan Foster who found the Count's story totally incredible. Barbara asks Murray:"Do you think anybody as conspicuous as Victor could escape? Do you think anybody that conspicuous would ever get sent on a secret mission?" to which her husband replies:"Maybe he's so conspicuous he looks innocent." (p. 117).

Both Murray and Barbara are fascinated by Victor, although their attitudes to him differ: Murray considers Victor, who is ten years older than him, to be his superior, looks up to Victor and is flattered by his friendship. Barbara is annoyed at Victor and is sexually attracted to him.

When Victor pays his first visit to the Ziegler's home, a strange verbal exchange takes place between him and Barbara Ziegler. Victor calls Barbara "Katerina Ivanovna Verkhovtseva", the name of a heroine of *The Brothers Karamazov*, and Barbara, very well-read for a small-town girl immediately responds, implying that she understands this allusion.

Dostoyevsky's Katarina is an impulsive, masterful and disdainfully proud girl, who sacrifices her pride to save her father from disgrace, and then tries to defend Mitya Karamazov, her fiancé, at his trial. Mitya had by then abandoned Katerina and turned his affection to Grushenka. Fully aware of that, Katerina sets a test of character for Mitya, giving him a large sum of money to be sent to her aunt. Mitya squanders the money on drunken orgies with Grushenka, although he realizes that Katerina had given him the money to test him. At his trial, Mitya accuses Katerina of his downfall, putting these words into her mouth: "You want the money to betray me with that creature of yours, so here's the money for you, I 'm giving it to you myself! Take it, if you're so dishonourable as to take it!" (p. 810).

Murray Ziegler in *Apples and Oranges* will apply this test to his friend Victor when he sends his wife up to Victor's apartment with some clean bedding, fully aware of the "electricity" between the two. By then, he had witnessed their mutual fascination, and is resigned to his fate of abandoned husband. When Barbara returns to find her husband drunk, Murray says only:"Didn't he want you?" She responds by pulling her husband close to her and saying firmly: "We are never going to talk about it." (p. l35). Next morning, Victor leaves town by bus, leaving behind a note addressed to the both Zieglers, which Barbara refuses to read. The note says: "I am full of gratitude and now I have enough money that I think it is time for me to follow my life elsewhere. I think of going to Montreal where I will enjoy speaking French." (p. 135).

Unlike Mitya Karamazov, Victor did not rise to the bait and take the offered gift, he did not want to betray Murray's trust by seducing his wife. And, after the tête-à-tête with Barbara, he could not stay with the Zieglers any longer, in spite of strained financial circumstances. By then, he had lost his farm, separated from his wife and moved into a caretaker's apartment at the back of Zeigler's store.

The title of this story, *Apples and Oranges* alludes to the game of choice, modified by Barbara which the three protagonists used to play on summer evenings. The narrator explains the nature of the game thus: "There was no way to win. The pleasure was in

thinking up tormenting choices or in being tormented by them, and the end came only when somebody cried. "I give up. I can't stand it. It is too stupid. I don't want to think about it anymore! Would you rather eat fresh corn on the cob or homemade strawberry ice cream?" (p. 123).

Each of the protagonists has to make a choice in the game of life. Murray gives in, thinking that Barbara is going to leave him with Victor. Barbara, ambivalent to the end, seems to be willing to play the game. Victor gets out, since he cannot stand it. He will forever remain the unspoken secret between the spouses, although every time they pass his abandoned farm, they cannot but think of the strange Polish man, the golden palomino, volatile and unpredictable to the end.

Alice Munro is an expert in cliff-hangers for endings and is a master of ambiguity. To the end, we do not know what had passed between Victor and Barbara in Victor's apartment, and what conversation took place. Would the supremely level-headed Barbara, who had discarded her own family, give up her material security, her marriage and her two children to follow a man of no means, a foreigner? Would passion prevail? Murray had thought so; life proved him wrong. And Victor's decision obviously prevailed in the end.

In *Lady Oracle* and in *Apples and Oranges*, the three ingredients of Polishness as perceived through Canadian eyes: nobility, bravery and the heroic are present. Both Paul and Victor have a heroic past, both have shown courage and both have inner nobility which shines through. Atwood treats these qualities ironically as being old-fashioned and absurd, Munro with much more perceptiveness and sensitivity. That is because Paul is seen through the eyes of a naive and uneducated girl, Joan, while Victor is observed by his friend and admirer, Murray, a truly sensitive man.

In both these works of fiction, the Pole is shown as a foreigner, a noble, highly-strung animal, such as a racing horse with a pedigree, or a cavalry officer. His motivation, way of thinking and finally, behaviour cannot be predicted. This is a man with a history, a man hurt by life and struggling to survive in an inhospitable environment.

Rather unexpectedly, we find the same qualities in an unusual novel written by Gail Henley, a fifth generation Polish Canadian raised in the Kashuby District of Ontario. This novel is entitled *Where the Cherries End Up*, a reference to a visit by the heroine and her family to help prepare a party at a cottage owned by wealthy Americans, and also to the desperate attempt to leave the misery of a poverty stricken home and to become successful.

The novel is written in the first person narrative, with a disclaimer that all resemblance to living persons is purely accidental, and a telling dedication to Florence Chippior Olsheskie, her husband and their eight children, presumably either the narrator's own parents or the models for the characters in the novel. The Olsheskies are a prominent Kashubian family who own a mountain and the land around Dam Lake.

Genia, the main protagonist, lives in the forest, on a farm which brings a very small income from the trees which her father cuts and sells. Her father, an honest and decent man who toils daily to feed his large family has a drinking problem. When drunk, he abuses his wife, accusing her of having had an affair with a man from the town before her marriage. Genia, a spunky girl, hates to see her mother's humiliation and her bruises, and hatches a plan to poison her father in order to protect her mother. She does not carry the plan through, and is surprised to hear her own mother praise her husband. As she grows up, and leaves to study at a university, Genia begins to see her parents' marriage and their struggle for survival through different eyes. She begins to realize that it was her father's interest in so many different things, his knowledge and his reading that propelled

her and some of her siblings to study. She loves her father, and throughout the novel keeps calling him “King” and referring to his blue eyes, his “princely head” and his fine features. She pities her father and explains that his hard life must have driven him to drink, as it has other men in the closely knit Kashubian community. She returns over and over again to visit with her family, rejoicing in their triumphs.

Genia Luckoskie’s life and career path has not been smooth. At McGill University, she found it difficult to catch up, after having graduated form a church-run school, supported by donations from the community. It was difficult for her to make friends, and, ashamed of her poor origins, she pretended, with some success, to have come from a better family, and from a city.

She had to rely on loans and bursaries for her upkeep. She was refused a bursary to do her graduate studies at the University of Toronto, since all the bursaries were awarded to American students who had come to study at Canadian universities; which indeed took place during the Vietnam War period. Bitterly disappointed, Genia says: “How unjust the Canadian government is to its own people. We were the first people to settle in Canada. We are absolutely the oldest Canadians. There’s a goddamn blue historical plaque sitting on a post outside Jasno Gora to prove it. Since we came to Canada one hundred years ago, we have never left yet, not even for a day. None of us. And we haven’t complained either... We took that handful of stones they gave us and kept our mouths shut. We just worked. We didn’t spend our time planning ways to cheat the government – we didn’t know you could. (p. 241).

Having run away from the constrictions of life in a small, inward looking Polish Canadian community which she had originally despised, Genia discovers a few years later that she is proud to have come from that old stock: “When I walk around Jasno Gora, I’ll damn well know where I am. I don’t want to pull anyone down. I want my suffering to redeem them. Mine will be a holy mission. A mission of encouragement. Because they’re all a part of me, or I might be a part of them.” (p. 241).

Genia is happy to find that her brother Ignacy wants to stay on the family farm and preserve everything: ”He won’t let anything be destroyed, replaced, polluted, sold out. And in one hundred years time there’ll still be a Luckoskie and there will still be a Polackville.” (p. 242). Such is the spirit of Polish Canadian Kashubians, the proud people who have preserved the Polish language for five generations. Genia Luckoskie’s perspective on Poles in Canada is that of a Canadian of Polish descent. She is more critical of her own people, and has the right to be, being one of them. There are no counts and no horses in this novel, just hard-working Polish farmers. It is a story of survival, the theme of Canadian literature.

A completely different view of Poles, this time in Poland, is presented in *A History of Forgetting*, Caroline Adderson’s highly praised novel, a part of which takes place in the Poland of the l990’s. The heroine of this novel, a young Canadian hairdresser, Alison happens to notice a tattoo on one of her elderly clients, and makes a silly comment, not realizing that the tattoo is a number from a concentration camp. She is disconsolate when a colleague explains what the number means, and apologizes to the old Jewish lady. When, later in the novel, a colleague hairdresser, who is gay, is murdered by neo-Nazi punks, Alison, shaken, sets out on a pilgrimage to Auschwitz with another friend from the salon, Malcolm, who is also gay.

Alison’s journey turns into an uninterrupted nightmare as soon as she sets foot in Poland. She does not speak the language, although she seems to understand quite a lot occasionally when she thinks that the Poles are trying to put her down. She guesses at

their meaning, often incorrectly, and, being highly strung and severely jet lagged, feels persecuted. The short stay in Cracow and the trip to Auschwitz are a series of miserable encounters with people, whose looks and behaviour are straight from Hieronymus Bosch's vision of Hell.

Alison's suffering starts at the hotel where a receptionist ignores her, when Alison asks for the key to her room. Alison complains, asking the receptionist why she is not nice when the hotel is so expensive. The woman is genuinely puzzled, and responds that she is in fact fond of Alison, and that she had discussed Alison's beautiful hair with another receptionist the day before. Yet, Alison is not mollified.

The next day starts ominously when Alison notices a mutilated, crucified pigeon in the branches of a tree. From then on, things continue to go downhill, and the world grows progressively more and more strange. The famous altar in the Mariacki church is covered up, and the church is under restoration. That is plausible enough, but the trumpet player takes a bow, having finished playing his tune on top of the church tower. A Gypsy urchin pinches Alison on the face, and unknown men offer to take her to Auschwitz, quoting what seem to her outrageous prices.

Distressed and almost sobbing, Alison seeks shelter in a cafe, where she orders pierogi, the only item she recognizes on the Polish menu. The waiter asks her if she had seen the castle, to which Alison replies that she did not know that Cracow had a castle, but anyhow she will probably have no time to see it as she is going elsewhere. The waiter immediately recognizes that she must be going to Auschwitz, and rather inexplicably grows cold towards her. As she eats her pierogi, Alison begins to count people in religious costume passing by the cafe, and she counts three nuns, two priests and a brown-robed monk on a bicycle She had never seen so many people in religious attire anywhere before.

In the evening, she again steps into the Mariacki church, and this time there is a service on. She realizes that it must have been a mass, because apparently people shake hands after the mass, and a gentleman says something like ”Cold hands but a warm heart” to Alison, instead of “Peace be with you” This time Alison inexplicably understands what the man says, and presumably feels propositioned. After this handshake, the priest steps down from the podium and he says something to the parishioners, and they all laugh outrageously, but this time Alison does not know why. A “bug-like nun” with a staff with a hook” beetles down the isle“ and opens the main altar for everyone to see. Alison is overwhelmed with the shining gold but does not really understand the meaning of the altar, not knowing anything about Christianity.

When Alison stares at a cross, the narrator makes a somewhat strange comment that ”she was reminded again how the force of suffering knocked the world off-kilter” (p. 318), presumably an allusion to the birth of Christianity.

Alison's world indeed continues to be off-kilter, and her agony continues unabated. The taxi driver who drives her to Auschwitz smokes, and Alison lacks the nerve to ask him to open the window. She suffers in silence, and understandably develops a dislike for the driver, who is smoking American cigarettes and wearing a new black leather jacket. Alison speculates: “He is just the right age... to have stood and stared through the barbed wire into the Museum before it was a Museum. “The driver, insensitive though he is to Alison's suffering only fiftyish. Auschwitz was liberated in l945, Alison's trip takes place in the nineties, fifty some years later.

Simple arithmetic shows that the driver must have been a baby or an infant in l945. Would an infant know exactly what that barbed wire meant? Alison is convinced that he

must have known. This brings to mind the scene from the film *Schindler's List*, where a little boy watching a train heading for Auschwitz and carrying Jews, makes a cut-throat sign at the passengers - a gratuitous gesture demonstrating the hatred of Polish children towards Jews. We are only a step away from Polish concentration camps, which is how some American writers and the media call Auschwitz and Birkenau. Needless to say, Alison does not see any Polish names among the victims of Auschwitz or hear about Maximillian Kolbe.

When she tries to return to Cracow, no one will give her any information about the departure of the train for Cracow, and people are rude when she bravely asks in Polish "Kiedy odchodzi pociag do Krakowa?", labouring "over the nonsense of each sound" (p. 351). Why nonsense? Because she does not speak the language? And why does she try so hard to communicate with the obnoxious Poles, when every train station in Poland has a printed timetable on the wall or on a display board?

The station cafeteria is filled with sullen men in tweed caps drinking beer in silence. A waitress with horrendous glued fake eyelashes and glued-on nails, displaying a set of gray teeth in a smile says to Alison: "Proszę Pana!", which is somewhat puzzling considering that Alison, a petite girl with dark long hair hardly looks masculine. When the waitress brings Alison a plate of French fries, the poor girl exclaims: "You are the first person to be nice to me in Poland", and promptly names the waitress "Our Lady of the Oswiecim Train." Obviously the strange religiosity of the Poles, which had so surprised Alison in Cracow, must have rubbed off on the innocent girl who had previously only once been in church, or more precisely, in Sunday school. Alison is not a believer and does not come from a religious family.

As the train rolls towards Cracow, Alison looks out the window and sees a woman in a babushka walking down a ditch with a rake and disturbing "a shitting cat". She also notices thatched houses and wooden houses with carved, brightly painted staves along the eaves and three copper church domes, floating like balloons. What is missing is a goat, and we would have a perfect Chagall picture. Does Alison really see Poland and not the Russia of the l920's?

It is significant that the main body of the novel, which takes place in Canada, is written in the third person objective narrative, while the beginning and the end, describing the trip to Poland, are both in italics and are delivered in the emotionally charged second person: "You feel yourself shrinking before her sneer, blushing with shame as she fires back a volley of sarcastic syllables. You almost want to duck.". "Proszę, you plead, proszę, just give me a fucking ticket!" (p. 352).

This kind of language seems incongruous in meek Allison's mouth. So who is speaking? The narrator, who expresses her own opinions, voices her own prejudices and shows a clear and strong anti-Polish bias from the beginning of this novel. This narrator's attitude explains both the incongruity of the picture and the venom with which all the Poles in this novel are portrayed.

This venom is reflected in the language of this second person narrator. The woman selling train tickets is "a battery hen ruffled in her coop and about to squawk" even before Alison has asked her a question. The narrator further comments: "Miracle of miracles, she has caught your meaning. Sourly, she ejaculates a reply." This is negatively charged language where the very choice of adjectives and verbs denote prejudice. The nun is a beetle, the priest - a balloon, and virtually every person encountered by Alison is a monster.

The second-person narrator’s musings about the smoking driver are very telling: ”All at once, you find you want to despise him. He may have lost family here; it is more than likely, yet you discount it because you have already judged him and found him deserving of your contempt.” (p. 10) and further on, another telling line: “He will likely earn more today shuttling passengers than you will for the months that will turn out to be years that you will spend writing about this day” (ibid). Is this the poor writer complaining about the time she spent writing this novel? Apparently so, since Alison is not a writer.

We get the impression that the innocent Alison who keeps sobbing and twisting her long hair throughout the novel is just a pretext to say all these nasty things about the callous Poles who do not remember Auschwitz, and who are guilty of the Holocaust. Applied to any other minority group in Canada, this kind of narrative could be called hate literature.

This novel was published with the financial aid of Canada Council for the Arts and the Canadian Government, for which the thirty-odd year old author expresses thanks in the preface. Zundel, the denier of the Holocaust was justly extradited to Germany where he will stand trial. Miss Adderson has built her literary reputation on this “gem of a novel”, nominated for the Rogers Trust Fiction Prize and the Ethel Wilson Fiction Prize.”

How little was needed: maybe a short trip to Auschwitz, or more likely, someone else’s jumbled account, a few Polish words for local colour, and a good dose of gratuitous hatred. It was enough to sell this book, and now the 33 millions of Canadians will learn from it “the truth about Poland”. Discouraged by this picture, they will vow never to visit such a horrible country.

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