

explorations



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REVIEW

Magdalena Ożarska. 2013. *Two Women Writers and Their Italian Tours: Mary Shelley's Rambles in Germany and Italy 1840, 1842 and 1843 and Łucja Rautenstrauchowa's In and Beyond the Alps*

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Magdalena Ożarska's monograph belongs to the field of comparative literature, a discipline whose self-contained status, according to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2003, xii), was already dying more than a decade ago. However, given the range and quantity of recent publications embracing comparative studies, it seems that the report of its death was an exaggeration, to paraphrase Mark Twain's ingenious expression. *Two Women Writers and Their Italian Tours* constitutes a significant contribution to the literary discourse on the relations between Polish and Anglophone literatures and cultures. *Magnetic Poles: Essays on Modern Polish and Comparative Literature* (2000), by George Gomori, *Living in Translation: Polish Writers in America* (2003), edited by Halina Stephan, *Lyric Poetry and Modern Politics: Russia, Poland, and the West* (2009), by Clare Cavanagh, and Magdalena Kay's *Knowing One's Place in Contemporary Irish and Polish Poetry: Zagajewski, Mahon, Heaney, Hartwig* (2012) are but a few of the books that demonstrate the great potential of comparative research and reflect the growing interest in Polish writers, whose texts transgress strictly contextualized, national identity-oriented readings, and call for recognition in world literature. Ożarska's interdisciplinary, multifaceted analysis may be of considerable value and utility, in the areas of women's studies and literary history as well, since she revives the generally unknown texts of two nineteenth-century female novelists whose literary oeuvres still have not received sufficient critical attention.

Ożarska plainly states that *Two Women Writers and Their Italian Tours* aims to "compare and contrast the use of the Italian tour convention" (2013, i) by Mary Shelley, the English novelist immortalized as the author of *Frankenstein*, and Łucja Rautenstrauchowa, a Polish writer of mediocre sentimental romances. She scrutinizes *Rambles in Germany and Italy 1840, 1842 and 1843*, by the former, and *In and Beyond the Alps*, by the latter. Every chapter of *Two Women Writers* records a different facet of the Italian tour convention and its reflections in the accounts of the two novelists' trips to Italy. The book is supplemented with an extended appendix containing selected excerpts

from Rautenstrauchowa's travel memoir, which, *nota bene*, Ożarska has translated into English, making some chapters available to the English-speaking audience for the first time.

Chapter One explains the continuing popularity of Italy on European itineraries in the first half of the nineteenth century, resulting in an abundance of recollections that gave rise to a new genre of travel writing, called "Italian tours." What is more, the chapter briefly outlines the biographies of both women and touches upon the reception of their texts in a diachronic perspective. Some speculations about the possible motivations behind publishing their books are also provided. In this chapter Ożarska skillfully and convincingly shows the need to fill in the gap in critical studies on both novelists' literary outputs.

The next chapter reveals to what degree Shelley and Rautenstrauchowa follow the pattern of the Italian tour genre. The author indicates a few significant parallels between both writers' styles. The presence of autobiographical elements, the use of an unidentified male addressee, and the recurrent insistence on the reliability and documentary quality of their narrations confirm that both women made conscious endeavors to adapt their travelogues to generic requirements. It is important to stress that Ożarska employs several analytical concepts, e.g. autobiographical pact, formal realism, and mimetic authority, around which she organizes her examination; thus providing a handy theoretical background for studying travel texts.

Chapter Three discusses the forms of divergence from the traditional model of Italian travelogues introduced by both authors. Ożarska notes that Shelley occasionally inserts extensive digressions on political issues, historical references, cultural intricacies and personal impressions, driving the narration away from the main focus of her Continental trip. Rautenstrauchowa, in turn, is likely to get carried away by sentimental sensations in the Sternean manner, which makes some of her letters disturbingly maudlin. In addition, the Polish novelist further modifies the genre by recounting fictional stories, like the Egeria plot, and pondering the charms of English Romantic poets. The penetrating insights into both travelogues presented in this chapter illuminate not only the women's literary talents, but also their psychological traits and emotional states.

The final part of *Two Women Writers* considers the question of applying the proper label of a tourist or traveler to the two novelists. Drawing on the taxonomy of attitudes to the Grand Tour proposed by Chloe Chard, Ożarska discerns the anti-Romantic stance, analogous to tourism, in their treatment of the foreign culture. Both women persist in avoiding socializing with the locals, tend to hold either spectatorial or anthropological tourist gazes, and evince a desire to define and classify other travelers. The conclusive remarks presented in the epilogue highlight the absence of descriptions of homecoming and offer a concise critical evaluation of the texts.

Two Women Writers and Their Italian Tours is a welcome addition to comparative and women's studies. One of its strengths lies in the meticulous attention the author gives to long-neglected travelogues of two nineteenth-century female writers who have been unjustly pigeonholed. In a suggestive and judicious way Ożarska proves that women's literature still deserves much more attention than it has received. The conspicuous similarities detected in both novelists' frames of mind and travel memoirs bring us closer to understanding the universality of social practices, such as traveling, poignantly expressed by Susan Glaspell (1918, 279): "We all go through the same things – it's all

just a different kind of the same thing!” – a remark that could aptly encapsulate the main premise of Ożarska’s study, but somehow missing in the book.

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