

REMEMBERING AMERICA IN THE WRITINGS  
OF THE POLISH PARTICIPANTS  
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA INTERNATIONAL  
WRITING PROGRAM:  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

**Keywords:** *memory; phenomenology; Edward C. Casey; United States of America in Polish literature; Polish culture; American culture; cross-cultural encounter*

**Abstract:** *The International Writing Program, started at the University of Iowa by Paul Engle and Hualing Nieh in the 1960s, has to date brought to the USA over 1400 writers from all over the world. Some of these writers, on returning home, published accounts of their stay in America. Polish writers have been frequent participants of the International Writing Program since its inception; a number of them published written accounts of their encounter with the USA after their return to Poland. Some of these accounts appeared before, and some after the 1989 political transformation in Poland and in Central and Eastern Europe. This article reviews Edward S. Casey's phenomenological approach to memory and uses it as a lens through which to look at the memories of the Polish writers' sojourns in America, carried by the written accounts. It lays particular emphasis on the link between memory and place, which features prominently in Edward S. Casey's approach and which is one of those aspects of it that may make it especially useful in the description, analysis and interpretation of the writers' accounts of their stays in the USA.*

The aim of the article is to review the phenomenological approach to memory, as espoused by Edward S. Casey, and to use it as theoretical perspective that may contribute novel insights in the description, analysis and interpretation of the written accounts of Polish writers' encounters with the United States, when they travelled there as participants of the University of Iowa International Writing Program.

The International Writing Program at the University of Iowa, the first of this type in the world, was established by the American poet Paul Engle and the Chinese writer Hualing Nieh (soon Paul's wife) in the year 1967. Paul Engle was not a novice with this kind of enterprise: previously he had served as the director of a program in creative writing (the Writers' Workshop) at the University of Iowa. Already the Writers' Workshop under his leadership occasionally invited foreign writers to participate; now the International Writing Program was designed wholly for foreigners (Nieh Engle and

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Engle xvii-xix). Paul Engle was certainly a very talented organizer; for his activities he was nominated, together with Hualing Nieh Engle, for the 1976 Nobel Peace Prize. To date, the International Writing Program has brought to the USA over 1400 writers from all over the world; among them, over 50 from Poland (*International Writing Program*).

Of the unusual aims of the Program, Andrzej Kijowski, one of the Program's early Polish participants, wrote:

Paul Engle mówił wyraźnie, że każdy powinien żyć sobie tak, jak chce. Zechce tłumaczyć i przedstawiać swoje utwory – dobrze, zechce pracować w ciszy – drugie dobrze, byle pamiętał, co zrobił w Iowa City. Paul Engle chce, żeby Iowa City stało się miejscem dobrych wspomnień, przelotną ojczyzną, do której kilkuset pisarzy, rozsianych na całym świecie, będzie potem wracało we wspomnieniach i snach.

Paul Engle said clearly that everybody should live as he or she pleased. If they want to translate and present their works – fine, if they want to work in silence – also fine, if only they would remember what they did in Iowa City. Paul Engle wants Iowa City to become a place of good memories, a temporary homeland to which several hundred writers, scattered around the world, would later return in their memories and dreams.<sup>1</sup> (Kijowski 61)

And so, as one can see, the work of memory – remembering the American experience – was regarded as one of the main aims of the Program from the very beginning of its operation.

Having returned home the Polish writers certainly remembered what they did in Iowa, and, more broadly, in the USA; their “temporary homeland” indeed so often became “a place of good memories,” as shown, for instance, by the writers’ correspondence with the Engles. Many of them, on return, wrote and published accounts of their stays. These accounts would take various forms: books, sections of books, or articles in periodicals.

An important context for many of the earlier accounts was the Cold War that defined so many aspects of life on both sides of the Iron Curtain and was especially damaging in the countries of the Eastern bloc because of the oppressive nature of their political system. The work of memory, indicated above as one of the main aims of the Program, may have had political significance: the writers were hoped to carry with them positive memories of the country so harshly criticized in the communist propaganda of the era. Yet, the significance of the Program in building bridges among people, countries and cultures certainly extended far beyond the Cold War ideological struggle, and the Program outlasted the Cold War itself.

It may be important to observe that the Polish participants of the Program have been selected by the hosts in Iowa, rather than by governmental officials in Poland. In the conditions of the communist system it meant that the writers who went to Iowa were not selected according to their level of support for the system. Paul Engle in the selection process cooperated with the officials from the American embassy and relied

<sup>1</sup> All translations from Polish in this article are mine, JK.

on personal recommendations; often, in fact, he asked for them in letters exchanged with former participants.

The Polish accounts of the writers' participation in the Iowa Program that were written and published during the Cold War include Jan Józef Szczepański's *Koniec westernu* [*The End of the Western*] (1971), or Andrzej Kijowski's *Podróż na najdalszy zachód* [*Journey to the Farthest West*] (1982). Another category are the accounts that have been published already after the political transformation in Central and Eastern Europe, begun in the year 1989. These would include Grzegorz Musiał's *Dziennik z Iowa* [*Diary from Iowa*] (2000), or Adriana Szymańska's *Dziedzice i barbarzyńcy. Notatnik amerykański* [*Heirs and Barbarians: An American Notebook*] (2007).

These authors who returned to their American experience again after 1989 offered a rare glimpse across the threshold of political transformation. One of them was Marek Skwarnicki, a Catholic poet and writer. In the year 1974 he published a partly fictionalized account of his American experience, the inspiration for which was his participation in the Iowa International Writing Program (*Wesele w Sioux City* [*Wedding in Sioux City*]). A quarter of a century later, in 1999, he published an autobiography, *Minione a bliskie* [*Things Past yet Present*], in which a chapter is devoted to his stay in Iowa.

Such were, in general terms, the Polish participants of the IWP, and the accounts that they produced.

Edward S. Casey, an influential contemporary American philosopher, whose interests, in addition to phenomenology, include philosophical psychology, aesthetics, and theory of psychoanalysis (Casey, Home page) has been a prolific writer. His chief work on the operation of memory is *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study*, first published in 1987 (the book had its second edition in 2000). He has also published many articles on the subject, including the 1985 "Keeping the Past in Mind," and the 2004 "Public Memory in Place and Time." His approach draws on the work of the leading representatives of phenomenological thought, from Edmund Husserl, through Martin Heidegger to Maurice Merleau-Ponty and beyond, moving from early "mentalist" conceptions of memory into a firm "world implacement" of it (144–45).

Casey's approach to memory and remembering seems to be very promising regarding the description, analysis and interpretation of the Polish writers' accounts of their stays in the USA, at least for two reasons. First, Casey, while retaining interest in individual experience, takes memory out of the mind of the individual rememberer and claims it to be "coextensive with world" (*Remembering* 311). This understanding appears particularly important when one sets out to analyse accounts whose context of publication was in many instances determined by the (external) conditions of the struggle between the two camps in the Cold War, including the activities of communist state censorship. Secondly, Casey emphasizes in his framework the significance of body and place for memory; especially the latter emphasis promises to be useful in the

analysis of accounts of travel to such a culturally significant place as the USA. For these and other reasons (such as, for instance, Casey's theorization of nostalgia), his approach may also be useful in the analysis of other works that belong to the domains of life writing and travel writing.

This article will concentrate on those aspects of Casey's framework that can be useful for the analysis of the accounts of the Polish participants of the University of Iowa IWP, occasionally equipping a review of these aspects with illustrative fragments from the accounts.

In Casey's account, memory is basic to human experience and human knowledge. He opens the Preface to *Remembering* by writing that

there can properly be no preface to remembering: no pre-facing the topic in a statement that would precede it and capture its essence or structure in advance. Memory itself is already in the advance position. Not only because remembering is at all times presupposed, but also because it is always at work: it is continually going on, often on several levels and in several ways at once. (ix)

Most generally, he distinguishes several types of memory: individual, social, collective, and public. Within his framework, it is only public memory – memory concentrated around an event and a place where an event happened, like 9/11 – that, as it seems, cannot be immediately used in the analysis of the discussed accounts.

Others can. This is how Casey characterizes these other types of memory in his 2004 "Public Memory in Place and Time". He begins with individual memory:

This refers to the person who is engaged in memory on any given occasion. That person, the always unique rememberer, remembers in several particular ways, not just recollecting states of affairs (recalling *that* something happened) but also remembering-*how* (to do certain things), remembering-*as* (x as y), etc. [. . .] each such act, however idiosyncratic it may be, is as interpersonal as it is personal, as much *between* beings as locked inside my own being. The primary locus of memory is found not only in the mind (or even brain, mind's physiological counterpart) but in an intersubjective nexus that is at once social and collective, cultural and public. ("Public Memory" 20–21)

Already on this individual level Casey takes memory out of the mind of the rememberer into the intersubjective world. It is important, as it allows to analyse written accounts of travel to the USA with making reference to the context of culture and discourse, which may include the presence – or absence – of such factors as the communist control of the media and the publishing industry, with consequences as to what particular writers could remember (in the sense of 'retell') about the USA in books and other publications at a particular time. The present article will return to this issue later, when bringing into discussion Marek Skwarnicki's already mentioned "two takes" on his stay in Iowa.

Secondly, Casey distinguishes social memory. In his definition,

This is the memory held in common by those who are affiliated either by kinship ties or by geographical proximity in neighborhoods, cities, and other regions, or else by engagement in a joint project. [. . .] What does “sharing memories” mean? I take this to signify the situation in which those who have had the same – I don’t say precisely *identical* – history as a given group or who live in the same place remember what has happened to that group or in that place (and often both). [. . .] When this is in fact happening, it is tantamount to “co-reminiscing,” that is, remembering in quasi-narrative form when assembled in a particular place (the front porch in an earlier era, at dinner tables on holidays). (“Public Memory” 21–22)

In the context of the Polish accounts of travel to the USA by the participants of the IWP, this refers to the memory of participation in the program by the Polish writers, who would communicate among themselves and “co-reminisce” about their stay, instances of which are provided in the accounts. An example of this can be found in Grzegorz Musiał’s *Dziennik z Iowa*, when he writes about co-reminiscing America, after his return to Poland, with Julia and Artur Międzyrzeccy, two Polish poets who also had visited Iowa (233).

Thirdly, the approach distinguishes collective memory. As Casey writes, it is

the circumstance in which different persons, not necessarily known to each other at all, nevertheless recall the same event – again, each in her own way. This is a case of remembering neither individually in isolation from others, nor in the company of others with whom one is acquainted, but remembering *severally*. (“Public Memory” 23)

Further explicating, Casey writes that collective memory is “*distributed* over a given population or a set of places [...]. It is formed spontaneously and involuntarily, and its entire *raison d’être* is convergent focus on a given topic: typically a dramatic event, but also a thought, a person, a nation” (“Public Memory” 23–24).

In the context of the present article, this concept may be used to refer to the collective memory of America itself; part of the intersubjective realm to which the writers’ published accounts of travel to America had to relate; to which they added new information, new praise and criticism, and in this way developed it and shaped it.

And, on the intersubjective level, for the Poles, America was a symbol rich in meanings. In the eighteenth century, when Poland disappeared as a sovereign state from the map of Europe through Prussian, Austrian and Russian partitions, the United States’ successful struggle for independence became an example speaking to the Poles with particular force (Jedlicki 209). Since the nineteenth century onwards, the USA has become home for millions of Polish immigrants, seeking freedom and economic betterment. In 1918 Poland became independent again, and a firm support for the Polish cause was voiced by President Woodrow Wilson. In the divided world that emerged from World War II, the United States, despite the official communist propaganda, continued to be seen as a symbol of freedom and prosperity, and also as the superpower that was engaged in the rivalry with, and hopefully would win against, the Soviet Union, whose “satellite state” Poland had to become. The image of America in Poland had its darker sides – Piotr Wandycz speaks in this context of an occasional mixing of

admiration for America with “a feeling of Old World class superiority and snobbery vis-à-vis the rich but crude Americans” (419) – but the bright sides of the image certainly prevailed. Under communism, this very positive image started to be consistently tarnished because of ideological and other factors, but, despite the pervasive official propaganda, the Poles “knew better.” It is in relation to such collective memory regarding the United States that the discussed accounts of Polish writers functioned.

Casey distinguishes several kinds of remembering; among them there are reminding, reminiscing, recognizing, and commemoration. Each is interesting in its special way. From the perspective adopted in this article, it is reminiscing that appears to be of special importance.<sup>2</sup> In Casey’s view, it is “remembering certain things *together*, [. . .] in *words*, not in images” (*Remembering* 104). It is remembering things in the presence of others or as if in the presence of others. Reminiscing can be realized as auto-reminiscing, and in the mode of writing (*Remembering* 117). As examples of written forms through which auto-reminiscing can take place, Casey discusses diaries and journals, autobiographies and memoirs (*Remembering* 118–19). It appears that the Polish writers’ accounts of their stays in the USA, varied as they are, can be categorized as belonging to this category of auto-reminiscing written texts.

Among the most important characteristics of reminiscing Casey cites re-living the past (to better understand it, or wistfully to savour it), and the public – communal-discursive – aspect of it (*Remembering* 107–17). As he writes, “The reminiscential return to the past is a return via discourse – via the word, *logos* – and as such it is an *understanding remembering* of it” (*Remembering* 117). It is through published words that the authors re-entered the past, and shared their re-lived experiences with the readers. Again – it is cultural, communal-discursive forces, (including political forces, even if Casey does not single them out), that shaped the accounts offered by the writers. Marek Skwarnicki’s two takes on the stay in Iowa are a good example of it. In the 1974 *Wesele w Sioux City* he told the readers, in a partly fictionalized manner, about his American experience. In the preface he warned the readers that his account is not factual in every detail (12). This admitted fictionalization may have been an escape formula that allowed him to remain truthful to himself and to the readers, and at the same time to edit out those fragments that would not have been approved by communist censorship. In his 1999

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<sup>2</sup> Casey distinguishes briefly between recounting, which “almost always involves a regulative narrative form, a form that allows the original order to be preserved,” and reminiscing, which “need not be narrative in form, nor is it constrained to repeat the original order of events it sets forth” (*Remembering* 106). He also proposes, somewhat tentatively, that reminiscing could be subsumed under recounting, and that both recounting and reminiscing should be categorized under the general category of retelling (*Remembering* 106). Later on, however, he focuses exclusively on reminiscing, and also points to diaries, journals, autobiographies and memoirs – regulative narrative forms – as examples of auto-reminiscing forms (*Remembering* 118–19). It seems that a strict distinction between recounting and reminiscing is not central to the whole framework, and, following Casey’s focus, will not be adopted in the present article.

autobiography *Minione a bliskie* he wrote that he in *Wesele w Sioux City* he had left out an important moment of his stay in the US, that is his first-ever meeting with Czesław Miłosz (427). This was so because Miłosz, an émigré poet and professor of literature at the University of California (later a Nobel Prize winner in literature), as an émigré and a defector from a Polish diplomatic post, had to disappear from all official publications, or else the state censors would have intervened.

According to Casey, a special role is played in remembering by place. As he writes, “It is the stabilizing persistence of place as a container of experiences that contributes so powerfully to its intrinsic memorability. An alert and alive memory connects spontaneously with place, finding in it features that favour and parallel its own activities. We might even say that memory is naturally place-oriented, or at least place-supported” (*Remembering* 188–87). The relationship between place and memory is realized through the “lived body” (of the subject), which mediates between them: “as psycho-physical in status, the lived body puts us in touch with the psychological aspects of remembering and the physical features of place” (*Remembering* 189).

In addition to the activity of the lived body, place relates strongly to memory through its own inherent qualities, which Casey subsumes under the notion of “landscape” (*Remembering* 197). Landscape helps the place increase its evocativeness through its variegation (variation); its sustaining character (being a durable ground for various projects and pursuits), and through its expressiveness, where it directly resonates with the rememberer’s emotions (*Remembering* 198–200). The travel accounts of Polish writers contain numerous examples of each. They abound in remarks on the geographical, social and other variation to be found in the USA. They contain – how could they not? – accounts of the various pursuits (travels, lectures, writing, socializing) undertaken by the writers on the “sustaining ground” of America. Finally, they also provide accounts of how the landscape, whether natural or urban, resonated with the writers’ emotions. Perhaps a particularly good example of the last aspect can be found in Andrzej Kijowski’s 1982 *Podróż na najdalszy zachód*, in which the author describes an experience that he had during a monotonous coach journey through a desert: an experience of intensified pure being, his consciousness resonating with the surrounding landscape and producing thoughts about the dubious achievements of human civilization generally (192–93). To point to another telling and in some senses similar example, Adriana Szymańska in her 2007 *Dziedzice i barbarzyńcy* writes about the state of “niemalże narkotycznego oszołomienia” ‘near narcotic stupefaction’ (181) that resulted from her encounter with the Grand Canyon, and, together with the deep spiritual experiences from Monument Valley, coloured the rest of her stay in the USA (190).

Place also builds its special relationship with memory through the things that occupy it, and are remembered as such. As Casey writes, “things fill out place memoirs by acting as their gathering-points, their main means of support. Things congeal the places we remember, just as places congeal remembered worlds [. . .]” (*Remembering* 206). It is to a large extent through memories of distinctive things, present in America and

used by Americans, that an attempt to convey the specificity of American culture, a remembered world, as distinct from Polish culture, could be made in the writers' accounts. Understandably, there are passages on the special role of the car in American culture; yet, there are also other things, at times surprising, that feature in the writings and help to define (and remember) aspects of the experienced cross-cultural encounter. One of them turns out to be – the telephone, or rather the ease of obtaining it. As in the communist era it was often necessary to wait for years to have the telephone installed, Polish writers remembering their stays in Iowa – Jan Józef Szczepański in the 1972 *Koniec westernu* (20–22), or Marek Skwarnicki in the 1999 *Minione a bliskie* (425) – comment on their shock at having only to request the installation, to have a telephone set working later on the same day. Szczepański in 1972 was not able to make anti-systemic remarks if he wished to avoid censors' radical intervention. As Skwarnicki writes in 1999 – a quarter of a century later and with no state censors to worry about – when he saw this happening in 1971,

Było to dla przybysza ze sfery komunistycznej świata wstrząsem psychicznym i po raz pierwszy raz wtedy obudziła się we mnie nadzieja, że komunizm zawali się dzięki swej nieudolności i zacołaniu, m. in. brakowi telefonów – o ile nie wywoła wojny.

It was a psychic shock for a newcomer from the communist sphere of the world, and at that moment the hope grew in me for the first time that communism would one day collapse because of its own inefficiency and backwardness, including the lack of telephones – if it does not trigger off war. (425)

In sum, in Casey's framework, "neither the human mind, nor even the individual rememberer in his or her self-identical being, [can] any longer claim to be the unique vehicle of memories. Instead, remembering can be said to be going on between the embodied human rememberer and the place he or she is in as well as with the others he or she is in the presence of" (*Remembering* 312). Such a framework seems indeed well-suited to organize, or to contribute to the theoretical organization of, a discussion of the accounts of Polish writers' journeys to the USA under the auspices of the University of Iowa International Writing Program. It can help to produce a rich description, analysis and interpretation of these accounts, in which a discussion of individual experience will find grounding in a public context, and will also be closely related to the varied specificity of the places remembered.

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