

Silesia and Oikology: What Knowledge of Home Does Silesia Offer?

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Abstract

The author addresses the problem of the philosophy of the Silesian home. Silesia is a borderland in Central Europe now located mostly in Poland, with small parts in the Czech Republic and Germany, whose cultural and political history was influenced by various traditions. The Silesian narrative of home, the unique Silesian oikology, brings us closer to renewing our discipline of life. Oikology is an idea that binds *oikos* (home) and *logos* (knowledge, reason, word, idea), but it also involves something else, that which is in-between: a correspondence between the two which all at once is also distance, care and desire. The author tries to interpret the Silesian oikology as a unique Silesian-made product.

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Silesian oikology

Silesia is the idea of at-homeness, practised every day. Silesia is a borderland in Central Europe now located mostly in Poland, with small parts in the Czech Republic and Germany, whose cultural and political history was influenced by various traditions. Things have never been easy here: never just one language, one fitting national label, one history, or one identity. Home has been spelled out into so many individual households: aristocratic, middle-class, working-class, peasant houses (cf. Greiner, 2000; Kuzio-Podrucki, 2007); those in the city and in the country; those in the centre and on the periphery; homes less and the least national; those whose sympathies leaned towards Bohemia, Germany or Poland and those of an altogether separate experience (in the sense of Silesian separatedness); those marked by multiplicity, within one family able to place, side by side, two or even three languages, intertwining religions in a similar way as well. But all these homes emerged by the virtue of the one shared place (cf. Bieniasz & Szczech, 1998; Fuchs, 1968; Kramarz, 1981). They were Silesian, not nondescript.

Owing to their experience of the border, such homes were becoming more or less frontier-like, as Silesia has been about the complex experience of the boundary brought about by a well-demarcated place. That is the reason for the affirmation of being on the borderline or next to it, as a boundary protects the domestic territory and comes close to the experience of human frailty. Whatever is frail must be strengthened by the fortitude of home, the attachment to the landscape, but also by reaching out towards all those located beyond the border. Place becomes characteristic as such, and care for one's home turns into an imperative. In Silesia people find themselves as subjects of their homes, irrespective of their social differences, being situated in a given historical moment, or relocations (displacements, migration, exile). Home that is so much more than just a building is related to the ideological and geographical territory. Silesia has created a singular religion of the domestic: you live in a place, together with it, next to it, and sometimes beside it, or despite it, but you never lose it from sight. Without home, "one is lost"; without emplacement one can fall into the hubris of unrootedness and independence instead of practising humility and performing service in one place. The teaching provided by the Silesian home and implemented throughout the ages, whether in Görlitz (Zgorzelec), Tarnowskie Góry (Tarnowitz), Pszczyna (Pless), Gliwice (Gleiwitz), Racibórz (Ratibor) or Wrocław (Breslau), has been straightforward: "we are where we are supposed to be". We travel, wander, get tossed around and displaced, but everywhere we go, we are accompanied by our idea of place. People shaped by the idea of Silesia live in Frankfurt, Katowice, Essen or Opava. Frontier people are simultaneously people of the place, and therefore they find it difficult to become familiar with the binary thinking that opposes a wanderer and a settled person, for what they experience is a sense of interconnectedness: we move out and in, wander around but also perfect the myth of settledness. The border goes across minds, separates people, places families in diverse corners of history, sometimes establishing a friendly connection between the domestic territory and whatever is outside, but it also moves people out of their houses, oftentimes greedily intervening in their interpersonal relationships. More than that, it establishes in the most peculiar of ways bonds among those who are displaced, who have moved or re-settled, while installing an emptiness in their midst. We might point to anthropology of experience

here, and say that the Silesian home displays “emptiness”, and does not disclose too much.

What would Silesian oikology be as a unique Silesian-made product?

Oikology is an idea that binds *oikos* (home) and *logos* (knowledge, reason, word, idea), but it also involves something else, that which is in-between: a correspondence between the two which all at once is also distance, care and desire (cf. Sławek, Kunce & Kadłubek 2013). Because of that, oikology situates the point of sharpness “a little further”. Emptiness and fissures provide the background for oikology as the knowledge of home, or perhaps knowledge by home that home prepares for us. We are those who have left home, and worked through the benefits and failures of rootedness and uprooting. We are those who look from afar so that things might become clearer, but also more acutely felt, as a lack, a gap, a fall. The home – our own home, understood as our neighbourhood, region, community, perhaps Europe, and finally as the world – will always have cracks and maybe even darkness within.

The Silesian home has always been a home in translation. What helps in understanding the phenomenon is the dispersed museums, whose very names allude to Silesia: Muzeum Górnośląskie (The Museum of Upper Silesia) in Bytom, Muzeum Śląskie (The Silesian Museum) in Katowice, Schlesisches Museum (The Silesian Museum) in Görlitz, Oberschlesisches Landesmuseum (The Upper Silesian Museum) in Ratingen, Haus Schlesien (The Silesian House) in Königswinter, Slezské Zemské Muzeum (The Museum of the Silesian Land) in Opava, Železniční Muzeum Moravskoslezské (Moravian-Silesian Railway Museum) in Ostrava, Muzeum Śląska Opolskiego (The Museum of Opole Silesia), Muzeum Śląska Cieszyńskiego (The Museum of Cieszyn Silesia), as well as Schlesisches Museum der Bildenden Künste (The Silesian Museum for Visual Arts) and the Wrocław Schlesisches Museum für Kunstgewerbe und Altertümer (The Silesian Museum of Craft and Antiques), which were both shut down in 1945. They have become a way of working through the Silesian home, once whatever had been lost became lost forever, and once the transparent home had become an opaque territory. Estrangement and distance connect thinking with experiencing. In Silesia one can communicate with others through one’s own sense of at-homeness, and the language as such does not matter, be it Polish, German, Czech or Silesian. One engages with one’s sense of at-homeness, but what creeps into that conversation is deferment. After all, the at-homeness that has been practised in Silesia for ages comes from the outside to supplant human beings. Settled and absorbed in that quiet conversation, one relinquishes the noisy course of culture, placing oneself out of the way, as one wants to take the effort to understand “home” from a distance, with no gusto, most of the time imperceptibly and within limits.

Unhurried and undemanding, the relationship of the idea of home with the concept of place leads us to the margins. In Silesia home is recognised as what is in the margins, be it the margins of the world, periphery of discourse, or whatever is off the official course of culture, out of the way of the promoted mobility of people and objects, but also away from the propaganda of stability and familiarity. Silesian oikology encourages us to take a few steps back, to loosen the bounds of functional thinking and slow down the rash exercise of practising “home”. It is not about practical thinking, and neither is it a set of instructions for using home.

Humanities and Silesian at-homeness

If the humanities are rediscovering themselves nowadays in the idea of at-homeness, they should pay attention to the Silesian experience of home. After the whimsical fascination with unrootedness and homelessness of thought and the apotheosis of lightness and dislocation, the domesticated humanities are becoming a challenge again, imbuing with gravity our words, actions and fortunes that are all emplaced, because we all belong to discrete points in the space-time continuum, even if we do sing the praises of movement. Emplacement reaches us when we are settled and when we wander, owing to the fact that we are born somewhere and we also die somewhere. What does come easy in Silesia is the experience of the relatedness of movement and stasis. The idea of place is broad: we wander around and then return to the notion of place that we have never really abandoned. Or perhaps it is more honest to say that we return to the place that has never allowed us to abandon it. The Silesian idea that place is necessary makes us work through the notion of home, continually taking the side of the domestic and the domestic bonds, even when we speak of their loosening and loss.

The knowledge dispensed by the Silesian home would be simple: it is an imperative of a return to the idea of home. This means that one cannot be out of place, a place that one would not be able to return to, even if that return were purely imaginary. We need this realisation as a signpost also pointing to the fact that what hovers over the idea of home – any home, yours, and mine – is a premonition of an end. Silesia has been through this so many times, experiencing both an end and a new beginning, undertaking the effort of coming back, even when accompanied by the knowledge that the places of days past are gone and that you cannot simply return to previous times. Those who find their place in Silesia have had their experience of the Silesian being-on-the-borderline and keeping watch over home in History; precisely because of the inescapability of time they go to the pains of living the place that has already been sentenced to perish away. Everything dies. Therefore, we return.

Silesian at-homeness on the spot eludes states and nations. Once one or the other storm of history has ended, home will be unfalteringly upheld in the movement that means return. This smacks of the Nietzschean eternal return of things, whereby the momentary and the eternal are tied together, as the linear order is destroyed (Nietzsche 2006, p. 128). When all things return, the idea of home as the home of being returns as well. The force of thinking (of) home is inescapable, but in Silesia it returns as an imperative: we are the ones that build and ruin houses, and we are also the ones that move them. Our lot is to repeat that experience. Destruction and decay exist in the service of the metaphysics of reconstruction, renewal, patching up and sustaining the household. Nietzschean “sameness” that returns, Gilles Deleuze would add, as what is “always different”, would be the knowledge of the impossibility of return of the things that are literally the same (Deleuze 1994, p. 41). This bind of eternity and the “now” is of significance for home.

When we speak of the “product” that is the Silesian home or the understanding of the Silesian at-homeness, we have to remember that we refer to the space that in the seventeenth century was called “the eye of the world” and “Europe’s emerald” (Silesia was praised thus by the poet Heinrich Mühlport in the verse that reads “Ocellus Orbis, & Smaragdus Europae”, in a funeral elegy for George William, who

died in 1675) (Mühlport, 1991). At the same time the very same Silesia was turning into a dangerous heritage that required systematic annihilation after 1945. What had been the experience of architectural luxury and civilising power taking the shape of urban and industrial development (the magnate families of Donnersmarck, Ballestrem, Schaffgotsch, Hochberg and Hohenlohe, industrialists such as Friedrich von Reden, Karol Godula and Franz von Winckler), the strength of theosophical, philosophical, literary and scientific thought (for the sake of example let us mention just the names of Jacob Böhme, Joseph von Eichendorff, Gerhart and Carl Hauptmann, Horst Bienek, Otto Stern and Kurt Adler) was also the experience of land degraded both industrially and manually.

Such a conjunction renders living in the service of the return of things a simple and ordinary task. The imperative of a return to the place that eludes our cognitive understanding is something that repeats itself over and over again. We perpetuate in our experience the return to the things closest to us. What comes back before and after our times is the idea of home; and it repeats itself in a form that is identical, but different. It will return as the road that we take to go back “to” our home, as well as to get “away” or “out of” it. We will repeat thinking in terms of home even when we escape from it. We will relive the experience of filling home with our presence only to remove ourselves from it. We will go on destroying and building houses, perform the wandering and the pilgrimage.

Care for the home is the care for the self that is continuously evolving in the face of the return of things. It reappears together with the necessity of citing François Villon’s lamentation (Villon, 1982, verses 329-356; verses 367-384) and the quotes from Ecclesiastes. The narrative of passing away in the service of the return of things does not fall silent at home. The movement of creation, destruction and return seems to be an ever-renewing experience of emplacement, as well as of a subjection to the flow of life that is intertwined with the feeling of being transported by life and the eternal return of things.

Remembering – Silesian admonition

In the face of equalisation and uniformisation, but also of the excessive, often xenophobic attachment to the familiar, it is worth recalling the Silesian understanding of home. Silesian oikology brings forth *oikos* in experience and in thought, without glorifying the limitations of bunkers or the endlessness of open space. By allowing thought to take a new root in the notion of place, oikology draws attention to home as a task that lies ahead of men. It renews thinking about the discipline of the household, but not of dictatorship. Without the fissures that somewhat unhinge the house, there would be no dwelling. When, in his 1951 lecture “Building Dwelling Thinking”, Martin Heidegger calls for a new investigation of the relationship between dwelling and building, this call corresponds with the Silesian assertion of home that is repeated on a daily basis. Owing to the fact that he realised the connectedness of care (*colere, cultura*) and building (*aedificare*), Heidegger discovered or re-discovered the essence of dwelling (Heidegger, 2000, p. 149).

We mention Heidegger’s admonition because the repeatedly renewed call of the Silesian home connects being, place and dwelling, somewhat contrarily to the whimsical narrative of nomads. However, nomads are not as unconstrained, nor are

homes as static as one thinks. If we are coming back home, again and anew – especially after glorifying the nomadic and unrooted being “everywhere and nowhere”, working through the fascination with the idea of global, pan-human and unfixed communities – it means that we are renewing the *gravitas* of home. Home then becomes the most intimate space of gravity delineating future travel trajectories and preserving the density of experiences of at-homeness. Still, it also means that our discovery of home preserves the fissures and the loosening of ties; that it conceals a warning against the excessive covering (up) of what is human as well as an admonition against the irresponsible annihilation of things intimate. To insist upon renewing home entails a return to the uncomplicatedness of domestic thinking. This renewed task is a challenge for our transient time. What stands on the side of such hope is not a global home, but locality in itself, neighbourliness, and the concrete character of space and time. The idea of the local encompasses our attachment to place, landscape, things, community and separatedness of fate, as well as singularity of culture and our metaphysical at-homeness in this particular take on time, space, necessity, contingency, order of things, etc. Home is not sunk in shapeless magma.

Silesia notes the strength of the spiritual place that lingers on and endures, even when strained; the cultural sense of attachment to oneself that is impossible to erase in enforced or self-willed movement of peoples and individuals; the rootedness that is stronger than any socio-political order. The Silesian narrative of the strength of place returns to us as a challenge that becomes the more relevant, the more we grapple with the insufficiency of the biological and political storylines. It throws at the merry(less) figure of the nomad a question that lands at his feet like logs: are you really so certain that home has so easily let you out into the world? That it has simply left you, or let go of you so lightly? The simplicity of the domestic is recovered among the Silesian experiences of the domestic, and may become a call for preserving home. It is an oikological creed: “And yet we are on the side of home”. Against all odds.

“Somewhere” – we are on the side of home

If one stands on the side of home, that means that home is revealed as a value. A place is spreadahead, and a return to it is within the realm of possibility. This realm may be understood as the Nietzschean watery expanse that lies wide open to us (Nietzsche 2006, p. 36). The Silesian realm of possibility becomes just like the tempestuous sea: an invitation to return. But the moment it becomes what it is “worth”, it turns into an imperative. One has to return. As an uncanny “where?”, home leads us beyond what is certain and does not promise an eternal vigil. Still, it does not cease to be an emplaced “somewhere”. “Exactly here”, “somewhere here”, and not “there”: place appears as “somewhere” that is important to us, for it is where it is “worth” it.

“Where?” can also arouse fear (Joyce, 2012, p. 558), as Tadeusz Sławek has demonstrated. “Where?” introduces anxiety for oneself and the place, expropriating it from the position of privileged duration (Sławek, 2013, p. 28). “Where?” basks in the shadow of “nothing”. We should ask about the way in which “where?” is unearthed in Silesia.

If we followed this path, we would find in this question only (or as much as) the breath of God’s repeatedly grave address to Adam in Genesis: “Where are you?”. We would find Hasidic thinkers and philosophers of dialogue that dwelled on it. Shneur

Zalman of Liadi, Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig all resonate in the discovery of that disturbing inquest which forms an invitation to take upon oneself human life understood as a journey (cf. Shneur Zalman of Liadi, 2005, p. 173; Buber, 2004, p. 13; Rosenzweig, 1976, pp. 195-196). The shock caused by such an unusual question about “YOU” will be enough for the “I” to discover itself (cf. Tischner 1990, p. 79). It is an indication of great significance for us. Silesian oikology laments the “where?” of the place that people have already questioned, just as it grieves for the future “where?” of other places, in which one has to see home. Where is this “somewhere” for people, what will wandering be in the name of “whereness?”; will it find its fulfillment “somewhere”? Alexander Nawarecki dramatically words his concern for emplacement in Silesian: “Kaj we are som?” (Where are we?), and provides the simplest answer: “My som tukej” (We are here) (Nawarecki, 2004, pp. 9-21). The question needs place, because people need emplacement.

Anxiety is supposed to lead us onto the right course, helping us to take upon ourselves the life and place that has been given to us. But even the most whimsical “wherever” carries within it the weight of emplacement. Silesian oikology then warns us against succumbing to the excessive desire for imbuing the question of whereness with terror, as our task is to find the road back home. Once “somewhere” or “wherever” become renewed by our “here, here I am”, they start being emplaced. Without leading us too far away, they allow us to come back home. What stands behind the question of “where?” that dislocates home and attachment is the care for the tangible “somewhere”.

Emplacement in the “exactly here” becomes the experience of tangibility of things, but it is also a touch of the eternal. At home the world stops. It freezes, even though everything around changes all the time. What opens up at home, where time stands still, in one place, is the space of neighbourliness. Place opens itself up as a way in to “somewhere”. Oikological reflection in Silesia would then provide an invitation to opening place, once it has become a space again.

In the margins

To think home, to think in terms of home, to experience home: these tasks permeate the attempts to domesticate the world and to bring the world within home. Derived from Silesian experiences, oikology would then form an invitation to take a few steps backwards in reflecting and experiencing home, as well as to broaden one’s thinking by making a few steps to the side or by coming to a halt. At the same time, however, it would comprise an invitation to engage in a movement forward or, finally, into a radial movement that emanates in all directions, binding whatever retreats and comes closer, goes out and returns, is accelerated or slowed down, past and future, central and peripheral. There is no room for oppositions or binaries of sense here: only for the obverse and the reverse, a presence side by side, with one another, together. Built up and intertwined, interruption and withdrawal are necessary for recovering oikological thinking, in which the house reappears as a value. A departure from acts of expansion and spectacular events, as well as a retreat from excessive attachment to familiarity, are needed so that we can unhinge our experience of home. Home can be found only in the margins of both our self-attachment as well as on the sidelines of our carefree diagnosis of the liberating lack of rootedness. Marginal thinking, liberated and undemanding, binds itself with the care of emplacement.

By touching the Silesian narrative of home, people become people in the margins, seeing the world, including themselves, from close-up and yet from afar. They are people of both distance and proximity. The vast perspective from which you can behold things, individuals, values and the sky is fused with the precision of the microscopic diagnosis of things that escape the attention of others. An act of seeing things is not vague, but becomes singular and clear. It is as if the work of a watchmaker were fused with the perspective of a theologian or an astronomer, but also with the skill and courage of a sailor. People in the margins have already relinquished a demanding attitude towards the world and are satisfied with questions that have no immediate answers. What is enough is a silence that comes instead of the noisy dispute that we so hastily call a dialogue. A withdrawal means the recovery of domestic gravity, but also the joy of loosening the ties with the world and oneself. Already liberated from ourselves, free from societal aspirations, we gaze at the place that has befallen us.

In a sense, the story of the Silesian home could be about a return to the lightness of the child-like way of looking at the world, including home itself. Such a way of looking explodes the existing order of things, destroys established schemas and liberates life. It is Nietzschean chaos incarnated. And here we touch the mystery of the conjunction, to which Silesian oikology can lead us. Home is: it begins and crumbles before our eyes; it becomes tangible and intangible; it eludes us and imposes its presence onto us. It is intimate and distant at the same time. It is the embodiment of opacity, but also of simplicity. The child immediately understands the call “Let’s go home!”; the Silesian “Do dom!” (Back to home) has a metaphysical tenor and terror to it.

Out of the combination of countless details – gestures, words, the symphony of colours and fragrances, glances, silences, ordering of things, network of paths and the height of neighbouring buildings; the shape of doorways, windows and thresholds; the aesthetic sense and the symbolic emplacement of detail; the surrounding greenery, humans, animals and the landscape; fragmentary thoughts and traces of writing – one can extract home. It cannot be measured. It is the longing for the future. It is always already a premonition of the inevitable end. Even in the most cheerful moments of experiencing home, the Silesian everyday carries gravity within, evoking the End.

Surrounded by the idea of home, we are experiencing the abjection characteristic of existential experience. It is both frightening and ordinary, which makes us indifferent to a continuous reflection on it. In Silesia people become indifferent to their own abjection by losing attachment to the narcissistic habit of looking at oneself and one’s possessions, and by abandoning interest in the past (from which no one sensible wants to learn anymore); they stand by the idea of home instead. This experience does not overpower them, but on the contrary, makes them affirm and renew their home.

Silesia – endless trajectories and the discipline of life

The Silesian home is rugged. As the reality of experience, home is rough and does not fall into a sweet-sounding tune: it involves suffering and love, attachment and exile, rootedness and loss, glamor and poverty, ownership and the lack thereof, membership and homelessness, safety and fear, order and ruin. The experience of at-homeness is

not smoothed out or strictly demarcated. It is full of nooks and corners, ambiguities, vague connotations and multiple names. The poverty of language is all the more noticeable when we compare it with the abundance of the sensual experience, the intensity of images, bodily memory, the domestic weight of time passing, the rhythm of daily life, the strength of the experience of space. This particular curvature of the Silesian home makes the domestic elude us, as if it were moving away from a straight line in order to send us forth into infinite trajectories. Home is a never-ending interaction of what is human and what goes beyond humanity – beyond our imagination, our surroundings, our human way of experiencing things, beyond our interpretation, and beyond our space and time.

Silesia teaches us that we have to get used to the unpredictable movement that is our lot and that is involuntarily, outside or above us; it forces us into subjection so that we no longer hold the rudder firmly in our hands. Home lives in us. We are, after all, drafted to create home in the movement of attraction, connection, disconnection, merging and destruction. We become subordinate to the disproportionate forces that permeate home. We work through the forces of attraction and weightlessness. Home defies coherent stories of physical or social body, revealing areas of spiritual density and thinning that are inconceivable to us. The Silesian home means both euphoria and decline. The self-limitation of knowledge to which home brings us allows us to harness our ability to understand and predict things, while constantly presenting us with infinite trajectories, infinite stories and infinite experiences of space.

The Silesian home conceals intriguing thinking. On the one hand, there is the immensity of the sky, curiosity, as well as universal values, and on the other that interruption, coming to a stop in one place, the security of home, and the limited, finite act of holding onto what is known. Infinite trajectories that burgeon out of home and then intersect with other homes, tying them with other spaces, require adjustments – and these are provided by the humility taught by home, for it is home that patiently subdues the arrogance of cognition and restrains the naive rush to expand power and to strengthen oneself in the world. In the experience of home we find a lesson in governance of that which can open and close things at the same time. In this sense, the Silesian home renews the discipline of life. We move away in order to get closer to what is essential. The Silesian narrative of home, the unique Silesian oikology, brings us closer to renewing our discipline of life.

The question instead of the conclusion

Finally, let us return once again to the disciplining question that the Silesian oikology throws, like logs, at the feet of the (un)happy nomad: are you really so certain that home has so easily let you out into the world? That it has simply left you, or let go of you so lightly?

Translated from the Polish by Anna Kowalcze-Pawlik

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