

## SUBJECTIVE COURSE OF POLISH LITERATURE

### On Olga Tokarczuk Essay by Katarzyna Kantner

I will speak about Olga Tokarczuk, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature and one of the most important contemporary Polish authors. She published over a dozen novels and collections of short stories. In order to present her books, I selected one theme – the word “between”. Why? The Swedish Academy motivated their decision, saying the author has “a narrative imagination that with encyclopaedic passion represents the crossing of boundaries as a form of life”. I also believe it is very important. What are those boundaries? Not only borders between countries, but mostly those which separate us from others, stereotypes, simplifications, clichés in our perception. They are a source of violence, they build hierarchies. I will speak about them – boundaries between genders, young and old, people and animals, and even between humans and gods.

A figure of great importance here, often mentioned in the context of Tokarczuk’s work, is the trickster, a god often appearing in various mythologies. A bit manipulative, a joker, undermining the established order, what we’re used to, gods’ laws. And Olga Tokarczuk is in a sense a trickster in Polish literature. Obviously not malicious or devious. But she consistently undermines boundaries, orders and norms. That’s what I want to speak about. I call it a dance on the border. It’s a better word than crossing, because it often involves moving from thing number 1 to thing number 2, as if standing on the border and leaning a bit to one side and to the other. I will speak about three main borders.

The first is the one between humans and animals. Key here is her essay “Animal Masks”, describing the process taking place in European thought for thousands of years, what we did with the help of our great philosophers: Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Descartes. All those men, the whole elite of European thought tried to separate human from animal. To show us we’re better than other beings. We can say this boundary between humans and animals was crucial for us, as we wanted to see ourselves as better. If you’re better, on top of the hierarchy of beings, you can kill, you can treat animals as a resource. Olga rejects it,



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she wants to overcome it using her literature. She wants to say we're not as different from animals as we'd like to. I will quote the novel "Flights" here: "He who has not mastered the art of speaking shall remain forever caught in a trap". This refers to animals, as they cannot speak about their pain, and in a way the European culture didn't ascribe dignity to their pain, didn't give them a chance of salvation. Animals are not represented in parliaments, Tokarczuk says. And she speaks for them.

The first book I want to mention is "Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead". It was the basis of Agnieszka Holland's movie "Spoor", which I highly recommend. It's partially a crime story. We're used to crime stories speaking about crime and punishment, good and evil, separated from each other. A criminal and a policeman, two adversaries fighting with each other, the former finally punished. In that book, something peculiar happens, crime and punishment switch places, they're not what we expect. They're exchangeable. The main character, Janina Duszejko, can be irritating, she embodies all the negative stereotypes of radical ecologists. She's a crazy defender of animal rights, can be seen as a negative example. She quarrels with hunters, guardians of the law, asking simple questions. How is it that you can kill in March and April and not before? That killing an animal is not a crime, but killing a human is? What makes us creatures which cannot be killed but who can kill others? Janina Duszejko is one of Tokarczuk's characters you can call crazy. She speaks logically on important matters, but the local community treats her like a stranger, a lunatic you shouldn't listen to. I won't give away the plot, but I can say this book really disturbs our cognitive stagnation. A bit like Faber's "Under the Skin" and Coetzee's works, especially "Lives of Animals". We're surprised, we face a truth which is uncomfortable, and after reading we cannot easily get back to before. That's all about "Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead", a provocative novel, often misread in Poland. Janina Duszejko is often merged with Olga Tokarczuk. Some say that she, supporter of astrology, a radical ecologist, pronounces Tokarczuk's views. Which isn't true. This character is a provocation, an unreliable narrator, but her actions make us assume her perspective and change ourselves.

I should also mention the mystery of animals. On the one hand, we have Janina Duszejko, who makes us aware of crimes against animals, and on the other – we can cross the boundary between humans and animals, but not in a very radical way. As people, we



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often use our own categories to describe animals. We often speak about our pets as if they were human, just like us. We make them look infantile, funny creatures, underdeveloped forms of humans. Olga Tokarczuk protests against that. She says animals will always remain a mystery, a microcosm we cannot fully know, and I would like to quote the essay “Animal Masks” here: “Haven’t you ever wondered if animals had masks? Straps and zips keeping them in place hidden behind ears? And those masks are as mysterious and enigmatic, in a way emblematic as human masks? Who’s hidden under the figure of the neighbours’ cat? And who’s that joyful Yorkshire terrier I see every day in the hall? Who is the pig, the hen and the cow? Am I allowed to pose this question?”. If we were to listen to the lesson, or rather suggestion given by Olga, we could say animals should remain something separate, a different quality we cannot truly understand, we cannot put ourselves in their position. As when Janina Duszejko wonders what it’s like to be a bat. We’ll never learn the animals’ perspective, tear the mask hidden in their self, in their inner microcosm, but we should try to understand that animals are closer to us than we think, because of the body. The body is the medium in which humans and animals meet. In the novel “Final Stories”, a beautiful triptych on three women, one of them experiences a very close encounter with animals. She has a car accident and ends up in a strange house in the middle of nowhere, which is a kind of hospice for dying animals. The animals die and the main character – Ida – helps them to cross to the other side. Something peculiar happens between the human and the animal in that story, as it turns out that humans suffer in a way similar to animals, that corporeality is that sphere in which we are similar. That human body is a cosmos which is unknown, which hurts, can be broken, contains numerous dark mechanisms which we don’t know and this body within us is an alien element, but at the same time it brings us closer to animals. The quality and strength of our suffering is similar. On the one hand, we have the European philosophy, humans above animals in the hierarchy of beings. A strong boundary. On the other, we have Buddhism and the concept of being so broad, it encompasses humans and all other beings who also feel and suffer. A concept much closer to Tokarczuk. We should speak here about empathy, which is crucial for her, which is one of the key concepts in her work. It means we try to put ourselves in another being’s position and understand their point of view, perspective and suffering. This movement of literary empathy is crucial for Tokarczuk. Also, in her work we



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see crossings, even literal, when a human being turns into an animal. Crossings to the other side, to become a part of the great universe of being where everything is connected, suffers and influences the rest. This vision of totality of being, not divided, seems to be the closest for Tokarczuk.

The next important boundary is the one between heresy and orthodoxy. Two powerful categories. Which raise the question about Olga Tokarczuk's attitude towards religion. Is she a religious writer? I wouldn't say so, but certainly a metaphysical writer, asking questions about what we cannot touch or name. Questions about spirituality, something more. Her metaphysics is very intimate. She strongly opposes combining religion and spirituality with politics and power. She's an adamant opposer of dogmas, of any revelations. She asks questions in a subtle way and calls literature the guardian of mystery. On the one hand we have big religions which reveal certain truths to us. Priests who say what is good and evil, create commandments, bulls, treatises. And a treatise on god is the last thing Tokarczuk would write, it seems. You don't write treatises on such things, they're not revealed, they appear only very subtly and in short glimpses, illuminations, as she says. Here, religiousness is alive, intimate and open. Or rather spirituality, a much better world. Very fascinating in her work is the amazing and colourful catalogue of heretics she creates. Her fantasy and creativity in coming up with figures opposing dogmatic religion and speaking in their own way. In Tokarczuk's first novel, "Journey of the People of the Book", we have French Huguenots, an alchemist, heretic figures who have to hide from Church authorities and we can feel the beginning of the theme of heretics here. With time, exemplified more and more, because Tokarczuk seems to be fascinated with heretics and all unofficial currents in the European thought, slightly crazy, very unorthodox, like alchemy, gnosis, cabbala. Later, in "House of Day, House of Night", one of the most important of Tokarczuk's novels, we have knifers. I like this sect, because it's a very peculiar and moving creation of literary imagination. They're a religious group making knives, i.e. tools for killing and marking the end. Why? Because knifers proclaim, similarly to Gnostics, that man fell into being, that we're sparks of light dispersed in the matter and the best thing for us is to die. So knifers cry when someone's born and rejoice over their graves, and create tools for inflicting the end for a reason. Another sect are runaways from the novel "Flights", a literary version of an actual Russian sect. Tokarczuk created a doctrine for them. Runaways claimed you have to move,



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because there is a great evil demon who wants to pin us down, so in order to escape him, we have to move, sway. Members of that sect are always on the move, travelling on the subway. And finally in “The Books of Jacob”, the biggest novel written by Tokarczuk, we have Frankists, one of the most fantastic sects in the history of Judaism, established in Poland in the 17th c. by a sinful messiah Jacob Frank, continuing the tradition of Sabbatai Zevi, who – which is shocking – proclaimed salvation through sin. Those are Tokarczuk’s heretics. I want to speak about one more, not a key one, but important, i.e. Paschalis from “House of Day, House of Night”. A monk from the Middle Ages, whom we would now describe as transsexual. Of course in the Middle Ages there were no sex reassignment surgeries, so Paschalis deals in a different way, searches for a way to express himself and finds a saint. A unique saint, rejected and forgotten today, namely Uncumber Wilgefortis. The legend says she was a beautiful girl whose father tried to force her into marriage. To avoid this, she asked Jesus to give her his face, a man’s face, and that’s how a symbol appeared: a woman on the cross, with a man’s head and a beard. As you can imagine, it’s not a symbol easily incorporated into the Christian imagery. Paschalis wore this image on his neck. He wrote her story, of a woman turned into man, finding himself in it. He wrote about her life, wanting to make her a saint to make sure that such individuals, misfits, can also be part of the Church and that he might be as well. But Paschalis and Uncumber were both rejected. The bishop reading the life so diligently written by Paschalis decides it’s close to heresy. Both the saint and her hagiographer are excluded. What seems important in all Tokarczuk’s works, is the religious experience full of paradoxes, balancing between sin and sanctity, femininity and masculinity. It’s a recurring theme. Another important figure of a heretic is the goddess. A goddess and a heretic is a unique combination. It’s Inanna, a Sumerian goddess reconstructed by Tokarczuk on the basis of old slates. She does an amazing thing – she combines the myth, with fragments of Sumarian texts placed within the story, with cyberpunk, and the story in itself is very much like a comic book. With cyberpunk aesthetics. We have a city with highly developed technology, people’s life is difficult, consists of basic functions, sometimes they’re even merged with machines they operate. In that city, ruled by three gods, an anarchist goddess appears. We have this extraordinary figure combining the rebellion of women against men with that of the proletariat against capitalists. And this goddess is open towards humans and their suffering, she enters the underworld to break one



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of the most fundamental rules – that of death. She crosses several boundaries, most of all the one between humans and gods, between the living and the dead. So Inanna is a heretic. I think Olga Tokarczuk is also a heretic to a large extent, we can describe her literary activities in this way. she flirts with heresy and provokes readers with alternative versions of what we're used to. And myth is one of key concepts in Tokarczuk's works. She often rewrites old myths, reinterprets them and adds contemporary meanings. Not only in „Anna In the Tombs of the World”.

The third boundary is ethnic, between Poles and other nations. Here I would like to speak about problems a writer of that kind can encounter in Poland. The Nobel Prize for Tokarczuk wasn't unanimously accepted, not everyone was happy that she was distinguished in this way. Of course for part, even most of the Polish public opinion it was wonderful. A huge celebration of our culture and literature, but for some – it was problematic. In nationalist discourse, clinging to its identity, when someone uncomfortable appears, often a question is asked: is it a Polish name? So many times in the Polish debate, the questions appeared: is Tokarczuk a Polish name? And it turned out it's Ukrainian. For some Olga Tokarczuk cannot be Polish, she's certainly German, Jewish, Russian, nobody knows which, but certainly not Polish, judging from what she says. We were all faced with the question if Tokarczuk is a Polish name. It's obviously irony, but she encountered this exclusion from the circle of “Polishness”. Often, in her works she speaks about the boundary between “us” and “them”, “ours” and “foreign”, the ethnic boundary. She also often depicts crossing that border. A model story here is “Frontier”, written almost 20 years ago, but published in 2015 in an anthology aiming at answering the crisis of refugees coming to Europe and present writers' opinion on this subject. The border here is the central topic, as we have two worlds: the civilised one and the barbarian one, separated by a border on fictitious Prut river. You can see this basic division here, between “us” and “them”. “Them” are the strangers arriving from faraway steppes, barbarians trying to enter our civilised world. The attempt to physically cross the border can lead to death, as there are guardians with guns. At some point, a barbarian woman with an infant crosses that border, she's accepted and establishes a strong connection with the civilised people who live on the other side and shoot. She sings and tells stories, and even though they cannot communicate in words, because they speak different languages, there is an understanding based on doing things together, creating



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objects, listening to stories and songs. Like cultural smuggling, she has no right to be there, but she's a redemptive exception. A border was overcome and something good came out of it. There are many such moments in Tokarczuk's prose, but I want to focus on three key ethnic relationships: between Poles and Germans, Poles and Jews, and Poles and Ukrainians.

Poles and Germans it's a difficult subject, one of the most explosive ones in Poland for years. It concerned many issues: our joint history, German occupation, then displacement of Germans after the war. Olga Tokarczuk is one of the strongest advocates of Polish-German dialogue. She comes from Lower Silesia – we're in Wrocław now, a place with which she's connected. Also Nowa Ruda and Wałbrzych – she lives and works in Lower Silesia, and one of the basic experiences here is the “formerly German”. Germans were deported from this area right after the war. Poles arrived here, deported from Eastern borderlands incorporated into the USSR. They arrived and moved into formerly German houses, prayed in German churches and used German objects. This experience of a wardrobe abandoned by a German, books, other objects you touch and live with is a crucial experience for the region and Olga Tokarczuk describes it in a beautiful way. For a moment she becomes like a medium, she touches an object and speaks about its former owner.

Her characters, touching formerly German objects, feel the presence of people who used to own them. As if a writer could, via objects, bring back the memory of what was before, what is forgotten. Also interesting is the way Tokarczuk describes German sentimental tourists. It is/was a difficult subject in Poland: German seniors coming to Poland to visit places where they grew up. And Polish residents were worried – here come the Germans to take what's theirs. But Olga Tokarczuk presented it in a different, very sensitive way, open to others and their feelings. In “House of Day, House of Night”, there's a story of a pair of Germans who come to Poland, not described as potentially aggressive German seniors, but gentle old people who have almost a child's perspective, looking at the places they remember from childhood, trying to recognize what they remember. Another book with a German motive is “E.E”, about a teenage medium Erna Eltzner. It's a story from Wrocław at the beginning of the 20th c., and the main character is based on Carl Gustav Jung's cousin. A characteristic feature of Tokarczuk's way of speaking about German elements is magic related to them. As if they came from a fairy tale, from a dream we try to



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remember. Especially in “House of Day, House of Night”, we have a fantastic palace where a family of German aristocrats used to live, a legendary monster, a dragon from German stories, and finally a German nanny of the main character, speaking and singing in German. Those elements are something we strive to reach, a dream we try to remember, but this remembering is difficult, because it isn’t our past, but we touch it through spaces, buildings and objects.

Another relationship is that between Poles and Jews. The first book with this motif is “Primeval and Other Times” – a story of a village, which is a centre of the universe, contains all other villages in itself, is almost mythical. Poles live there, and in the village next to it, Jeszkotle – Jews live. There are no difficult relationships there. It’s a novel where the situation between Poles and Jews is good. And there’s a beautiful story of an unconsumed romance of the Polish miller’s wife Genowefa and a Jewish boy Ellie. They try to communicate, they love each other very much, but the border between them results not from the fact they come from two nations, but from Genowefa wanting to be faithful to her husband. So in “Primeval” the relationship between Poles and Jews is not marked by problems yet. Poles witnessed the extermination of Jews, but only witnessed, they didn’t participate in it. All this gets complicated in “The Books of Jacob”, i.e. the almost 1000-pages long opus magnum on the Frankists. We have to speak here about the Polish 17th c., as Poles learned about that period mostly from Henryk Sienkiewicz, he taught us how to think about that time. In his vision, Poles were knights defending Christianity from infidels. Tokarczuk presents this heroic Polish 17th c. from Sienkiewicz in an entirely different way. She said once that Polish history needs heresy and here she creates one. She speaks about Poland of that period in a way which is uncomfortable for many, and at the same time completely different. Frankists, as I already mentioned, are one of the most unique sects in the history of Judaism. All begins in 1655, when Jacob Frank proclaims himself the messiah. He’s an ordinary (or very extraordinary) boy who hears a voice, or perhaps has a superiority complex, we don’t know. He creates the concept of salvation coming through sin. And one of the forms of that sin can be conversion, in other words – in order to be saved, Frankists first converted to different religions, Christianity and Islam. The idea of conversion as a good deed is at least shocking from the point of view of Judaism, any orthodoxy really, and that’s what Frankists do. At the same time, through this, they renounce their identity, disassociate



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themselves from their tradition, and here I must say that Tokarczuk advocates communication between nations, she doesn't want to fetishize this identity, doesn't claim it has any value in itself, but in her books there are characters who renounce their identity and it becomes a source of personal drama for them. It is for Frankists, for sure. They have to pay for crossing the border. Another important element of the novel are blood legends, one of the nastiest motifs in the history of antisemitism, according to which Jews needed Christian blood to perform sinful, dark rituals. Thousands of people died on account of that legend, were sentenced to death. Tokarczuk describes how Poles did it, and one of the most active figures in this area is a Polish national "saint", bishop Kajetan Sołtyk. Tokarczuk shows the complexity of the Polish-Jewish relations in the 17th c., which is not in line with the image of Poland as a very tolerant and open country. We can definitely call "The Books of Jacob" a historical heresy.

The next relationship is between Poles and Ukrainians, with the strongest representation in "Final Stories". Here the tension, the border between two nations enters the lives of two people: a Polish man, Piotr, and a Ukrainian woman, Paraskewia. They meet, get married out of convenience – Paraskewia is pregnant and her mother convinces her to marry that mature, practical Pole. And here a drama starts, when the difficult Polish-Ukrainian relations in Volhynia enter their relationship. Those two nations are so close, the languages are so similar they almost merge into one, but there are also huge tensions and many events which are still grudges in our history. All this enters the most intimate spheres of two people's relationship, and when Paraskewia wants to offend Petr, she speaks Ukrainian to him, and when he wants to possess her, he says: speak Polish to me. Finally Piotr takes his wife from Ukraine to Poland, and their child dies during that trip. She'll never forgive him for that, they'll live together like strangers, and she'll love to search for differences between them. She'll say: you're Piotr, you're a man, you like borders and order, and I'm a woman and I like what's small and frail, details. Stubbornly seeking for differences between herself and her husband is a way to protect her identity, because he tries to possess her, and she defends herself. They cannot come to agreement for years, similarly to Poles and Ukrainians, but with time, slowly the agreement is reached. And it turns out there was love, although never put in words, or maybe it appeared after many years. It's probably the strongest example in Tokarczuk's books of an ethnic difference coming between two people



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and very intensely determining their life together. There is one more thing to add: we have many stories in those books, in which representatives of two nations meet and the crossing take place where one falls in love with the other and tries to change their identity. The cost of such a decision is always big, as if the border defended itself, and each attempt to cross it has to cost. As if Tokarczuk wanted to say: you have to do it, you have to try, because beautiful things happen then. But at the same time nothing is for free, it's always related to some suffering, some loss. It's always difficult, because ethnic borders are very strong, and nations put a lot of effort and energy into maintaining them, in this way building their identity. In other words, we always try to format the other in accordance with our expectations, separate ourselves with a sanitary cordon worried about disturbing what we call our identity, but the most extraordinary things take place where this barrier is broken. But there is a cost.

Finally, I would like to say that this movement of transgression performed by Olga Tokarczuk in her works is one of the key elements and in this way I believe that the Swedish Academy selected an excellent motivation for awarding Tokarczuk with the Nobel Prize in Literature. I think that it's best to sum it up using Olga Tokarczuk's words from an essay entitled "Infinitely Huge Borderland", which is an excellent summary of her output, because she writes to us exactly from this huge borderland. She lives there, she writes about it, and in each of her works we find a number of borders being crossed, broken. Now I would like to quote Olga speaking about one of her novels: "I understand it as a story about borders, both physical and tangible, and intangible, which we construct in our heads to create a misleading sense of order and control over reality. Past – future, real – unreal, man – woman, human – animal, dream – reality, one country – another country, one language – another language. The opposition of those categories create a simple grid, making us feel safe – we believe we understand the world. But that which is the most interesting, the most lively and real, always takes place in between, on the infinitely huge borderland". That is why I decided to use the world „between” as the key motif of this essay and I would like to leave you with this word. If you ever read those books, pay attention to the word “between”, because it's really important. And crossing borders is difficult, but definitely worth trying. Thank you.



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## Appendix

### A short dictionary of terms important in the work of Olga Tokarczuk

**BOUNDARY** – a key concept in Tokarczuk’s works. According to the Swedish Academy, she uses “the crossing of boundaries” [not only geographical, but most of all those separating us from others, building distance and prejudice] as a form of life;

**CONSTELLATION NOVEL** – a term coined by Olga Tokarczuk to describe a collage technique of writing a novel, building it out of short narratives, sketches and miniatures; she used this technique in e.g. “Flights”;

**DREAM** – an important element in human life and perception of reality, explored for example in “House of Day, House of Night”;

**HERESY** – a belief or opinion contrary to orthodox religious doctrine. Exploring heresy and heretic is one of the most important theme in Olga Tokarczuk’s works;

**A GAME OF W HETEROTOPHY** – concept presented in a manifesto opening the essay collection „The Moment of the Bear”; it consists in breaking down selected established and blindly accepted truths about reality and exposing their groundlessness in order to change the way we routinely perceive the world around us;

**INSIGHT** – a short, fragmentary glimpse into the metaphysical, which is – according to Olga Tokarczuk – our only contact with the spiritual world, and opposed to dogmatic doctrine & truths of established religions;

**THE MOMENT OF A BEAR** – a collection of essays published in 2012, explaining many key concepts in Olga Tokarczuk’s work;

**MYTH** – exploration of myths from various cultures of the world, reinterpreting them and ascribing new, contemporary meanings is one of the tools used by Olga Tokarczuk in her works, most notably in “Anna In in the Tombs of the World”;

**OBSERVER** – one of Olga Tokarczuk’s methods of work, as explained by herself, consisting in carefully observing the surrounding reality instead of using fantasy and imagination to create her literary worlds;



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