

The Issue of Waste in the Works by Olga Tokarczuk

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In the short story *Góra wszystkich świętych* [All Saints' Mountain] from *Opowiadania bizardne* [Tales of the Bizarre] Olga Tokarczuk describes a cemetery of holy cows, where we can see:

(...) twisted, half-digested plastic bags, with logos of chain-store brands still visible, strings, rubber bands, bottle caps, cups. No organic digestive juice could deal with this advanced human chemistry. Cows ate waste and carried it, undigested, in their stomachs. This is what is left from cows, I was told. The carcass disappears, eaten by insects and predators. What is left, is eternal. Waste¹.

We do not expect to find elements such as plastic bags in a holy place, i.e., a cemetery of sacred animals. However, they still appear there, scaring us away with their presence. We will try to consider the issue of waste in the works by Olga Tokarczuk, as well as the role it plays in her prose. How does waste interact with a literary text?

According to the dictionary definition, waste is something unwanted, unusable, used, useless, especially leftovers, remains, rubbish². One could say an object becomes waste due to the intention of disposing of it. Every object has the potential of becoming waste. According to Martin Heidegger, objects become visible once they cease to serve their function; we notice them when they do not work properly. Some can be eliminated or reduced, but others can no longer be used – and thus become waste. In this context, the status of waste is not obvious. Waste used to be handy when it served man, but it lost this property once it broke down and was thrown away. Useless objects are marginalized. The problem with waste is its existence – its intrusive presence makes us feel uncomfortable in a way.

¹ Olga Tokarczuk, "Góra wszystkich świętych", in *Opowiadania bizardne* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2018), 195-196.

² <https://sjp.pwn.pl/doroszewski/smiec-I;5505639.html>, date of access 20.03.2021.

Greg Kennedy presents an interesting theory concerning waste in *An Ontology of Trash. The Disposable and Its Problematic Nature*, where he asks questions about waste as something non-existent, for non-existence is one property of waste. According to Kennedy, “a study of trash cannot be anything but ontological because, with trash being is most at issue. Trash is supposed to be nothing, a non-existent; it is supposed to lack whatever legitimates the presence of an object in our world”³. He believes that “trash necessarily follows from the logic of care-free commodities, whose consumption necessarily excludes taking care of them”⁴, that “the commodified consumption that inexorably concludes with trash does not let beings be and this ontological refusal like-wise prevents us from entering into our own being”⁵.

Some objects are single-use; they exist solely for a certain purpose, such as being containers for warm takeaway coffee, only to be discarded once they fulfill their purpose. Our attitude to things has changed over time. Thanks to technological advancements producing single-use objects is possible and commercially viable (also due to mass production, cheap labor, coordinated transport systems, access to resources). Before the Industrial Revolution such an undertaking would have been impossible due to technological and economic limitations, as a result of which few people could afford throwing things away. Nowadays food products are protected from the outside world with plastic (made of oil). Once we have drunk milk, we are left with waste – a container which no longer serves its role. Kennedy points out that “[t]o seal a piece of food in plastic is to sever all remaining relations it has with living nature”⁶. Food containers, apart from storing food, securing it from the outside world, and providing a deceptive sense of the sterility of the food they contain, also detach us from the production process. We lose the cause-and-effect relationship and cease to see the connection with nature.

Kennedy observes that “[p]lastic is a substance completely inert and lifeless”⁷, and that “[t]echnology favors it for its outstanding malleability; plastic, unlike natural materials (...) offers no substantial resistance to its manipulation”⁸. Even its very name indicates that it stands in opposition to nature, for it was made and produced by man in a laboratory. Objects made of plastic surround man in the form of clothes made of artificial fabrics, as well as processed plastic. We also rely on single-use packages or plastic bags. The scale of the problem can be easily seen in any shop, where it is difficult to find basic products that are not packed in plastic.

In the essay *Ogródki działkowe i pola golfowe* [Allotments and golf courses], Tokarczuk describes an allotment as a place for growing vegetables, with neat patches. Next to carrots and peas she describes sticks with “cut, empty mineral water bottles placed at the top, which are now stirred by the wind, making a noise which scares birds away”⁹. An allotment is (typically, but not always) a place in a city, where some space is divided into individual allotments purchased for recreational

³ Greg Kennedy, *An Ontology of Trash. The Disposable and Its Problematic Nature* (State University of New York, 2007), x.

⁴ Kennedy, 123.

⁵ Kennedy.

⁶ Kennedy, 66.

⁷ Kennedy, *An Ontology of Trash. The Disposable and Its Problematic Nature*, 66.

⁸ Kennedy.

⁹ Olga Tokarczuk, “Ogródki działkowe i pola golfowe”, in *Moment niedźwiedzia*, (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2012), 108.

purposes or for growing vegetables. This space is artificial, torn away from the city tissue, a manifestation of a longing for nature. However, in the essay this space is invaded by a “foreign” element – a plastic bottle. It is being reused; combined with a stick (an element of a tree – i.e., it belongs to nature) it is supposed to protect crops from birds with its presence through its unusual shape and the noise it makes when stirred by the wind. This artificial element enters the natural world and distorts its order and space. Tokarczuk continues to stress this invasion into the world of nature: “one by one – people take picnic food out of plastic bags, put up cheap tin barbecues, fill plastic cups with supermarket juice. Once they finish eating, they will pull weeds and secure poles for peas”¹⁰. Tokarczuk points out “plastic bags”, “cheap tin barbecues” which are not durable, for high quality typically does not correlate with low prices. It is safe to assume that if such a portable barbecue breaks down, it will be thrown away. However, it is the “plastic cups” that are the biggest sin – they will be discarded after being used only once. All these objects constitute the profane, which violates nature’s integrity. We prohibit ourselves from nature by scaring it away with plastic bottles on sticks, which symbolizes man’s dominance over nature with our artificial products.

In *Prawdziwa historia* [True story] (*Opowiadania bizarne*), an art professor arrives in a city to give a talk at a conference. He goes to the center of town to watch the life of the metropolis. He watches people who “carry their shopping in gargantuan plastic bags, with huge leaves of parsley and stiff brooms of mature leek sticking out”¹¹ – plastic bags are an inseparable part of shopping both in the literary and physical world. People can do shopping at a street market located on a square outside the city center, which offers “cheap Chinese commodities” next to fruit and vegetables. The professor sees passers-by attracted by “displays full of branded goods, displayed wittily and flirtatiously, like works of art”¹². In a review published in “Mały Format” Paweł Kaczmarski points out that the short story has a parabolic message: “status and prosperity are neither certain nor stable. The way we present ourselves influences how we are perceived”¹³. It could be said that how we are perceived depends on our clothes and the things we own. The protagonist of the short story sums up that “today shopping resembles browsing through garbage”¹⁴ – it is hard to find something valuable among the mass-produced products which inundate us from huge factories.

The chapter *On the Origin of Species* from the novel *Flights* offers an interesting perspective. It is a reference to Darwin’s 1859 *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, in which the scholar presents the principles of his theory of evolution. Before, it was believed that natural species were not subject to change, whereas Darwin introduced a permanent state of change by showing that all species (including humans) gradually change. Rather than created by God, they emerge and die out as a result of slow, constantly ongoing causes. Changes are endless, for they are fuelled by species’ survival. The most important reason behind this changeability “is the mutual affinity between one organism and another – perfection of

¹⁰Tokarczuk.

¹¹Olga Tokarczuk, “Prawdziwa historia”, in: *Opowiadania bizarne*, (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2018), 86.

¹²Tokarczuk, 89.

¹³Paweł Kaczmarski, “Opowiadania mizerne” [Mediocre stories], a review of *Opowiadania bizarne* by Olga Tokarczuk, *Mały format*, 07-08/2018, <http://malyformat.com/2018/08/opowiadania-mizerne/>.

¹⁴Tokarczuk, “Prawdziwa historia”, in: *Opowiadania bizarne*, 91.

one organism leads to the perfection or emergence of others”¹⁵. In *Flights* Tokarczuk adds another chapter to Darwin’s history of evolution. A careful observer notices the emergence of a new species, unknown in Darwin’s times: plastic bags, which are “mobile and light; prehensile ears permit them to latch onto objects, or the appendages of other creatures, thus expanding their habitat”¹⁶. They can move thanks to their small size, light weight, as well as due to the fact that “they’re made up of their surfaces exclusively, empty on the inside, and this historic foregoing of all contents unexpectedly affords them great evolutionary benefits”¹⁷. Plastic bags are man-made.

By referring to the theory of evolution, Tokarczuk shows that the human species may be too slow to adapt to an environment dominated by a new species of “aggressive” plastic bags, for they are created too fast for people to adapt to the changes dictated by survival next to an invasive species. The ontological status of plastic bags should be considered, for Tokarczuk clearly presents them as an intermediate entity between living organisms – they are neither plants nor animals, but they can move, which distinguishes them from inanimate objects. In light of these arguments, Magdalena Ochwat’s interpretation of this fragment of the novel is correct:

Darwin’s theory, known as survival of the fittest, is based on constant competition between organisms which belong to the same species, or between organisms which belong to different species. This allows to see the catastrophic vision of the future – plastic bags may be the stronger, more durable, and better adaptable form of life than homo sapiens¹⁸.

In the context of the whole novel, which is devoted to travelling and the need to be in constant motion in order to uncover one’s inner “I”, plastic bags – although a man-made product – are better adapted to the world and travelling. Such a bag is a pure form which seeks content. Carried by wind, it can get stuck to random objects, it touches them, is filled with them, and then gets bored and moves on to find new contents. Darwin observes the distribution of species, which depends on – among other things – climate changes. Well adapted organisms are able to survive and pass down some particular feature from generation to generation, which ultimately becomes characteristic of the whole group. Plastic bags are eternal; they will decompose in 300 years, and enter the endless cycle of nature, which is their constant feature, as along with lightness, movability, and being in constant motion. They are able to dominate the whole world; we can find them in oceans, on land, in mountains, they slowly take over our habitats. It is ironic, for they are man-made. According to Darwin, new forms of life are better than older ones (as they are better adapted), and the evolutionary process is not just a process that leads to increased complexity (from simpler to more complex forms), but also signifies progress, improvement, and – ultimately – a drive for perfection. In the case of forms such as plastic bags – made by man from polymers, they are already complex at the moment of production, but later, due to changes induced by external conditions, they break down into smaller pieces, which nonetheless continue to exist

¹⁵Karol Darwin, *O powstawaniu gatunków drogą doboru naturalnego* [*On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*], <https://wolnelektury.pl/media/book/pdf/darwin-o-powstawaniu-gatunkow.pdf>. English version: http://darwin-online.org.uk/converted/pdf/1861_OriginNY_F382.pdf

¹⁶Olga Tokarczuk, *Flights*, (London: Fitzgarraldo Editions, translated into English by Jennifer Croft, 2017), 465.

¹⁷Tokarczuk.

¹⁸Magdalena. Ochwat, „Edukacja polonistyczna wobec kryzysu klimatycznego – rozpoznania i rekomendacje dydaktyczne”, w: *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska. Sectio N: Educatio Nova*, vol.5, (Listopad 2020): 198.

in space. According to the theory of evolution, “[m]an does not actually produce variability; he only unintentionally exposes organic beings to new conditions of life, and then nature acts on the organisation, and causes variability”¹⁹. Darwin identifies climate changes among the reasons behind the evolution of species. Nowadays we are experiencing another climate change, this time caused by man, to which animals cannot adapt, which is leading to the sixth extinction of species. Living organisms are being replaced by a new species, the man-made plastic bag, which does not require sunlight, access to water, adequate temperatures or air to survive – it only needs to exist and move. We have created a new species for the devastated world.

In *Przyszła archeologia* [Future archeology], Tokarczuk considers the way our generation will be perceived in the future. She describes contaminated beaches, where we can already find “plastic bottles after all drinks of the world, as well as plastic sheets, tires, shoes, Styrofoam, canisters, barrels and plenty other small stuff – toys, buttons, parts of some mysterious equipment, containers”²⁰. This will concern future archeologists studying beaches and uncovering all this waste there. Aleksander Nawarecki, as if confirming Tokarczuk’s premonitions, observes in his *Lajerman* that “in fact archeologists dream about discovering an ancient landfill”²¹. Based on his considerations regarding industrial landfills (typically from mines) he observes that “the difference between a treasure and trash can be relative”²². In order to find something precious, one needs to scavenge – but we can never be sure whether a discarded thing is precious or trash. In every object, “every oddment there are oddments, which can not only be useful, but actually precious”²³. In her essay *Feralne psy* [Stray dogs] Tokarczuk sums up that “although the poor are getting poorer, the rich’s dumpsters are well-stocked”²⁴, and in the essay *Śmieci, śmieci* [Trash, trash]: “the waste system is based on social inequalities. The rich throw away what they no longer need, and the poor collect and reuse those second-hand things”²⁵. Charity shops, which Tokarczuk saw in Switzerland, may be a solution to the problem of inequality. They are known as *Brockenhaus* – the name refers to the story from the Gospel according to St. John, in which Jesus, after the miracle of the five loaves and two fish, tells his disciples to collect the crumbs, so that nothing was left. This idea appealed to Tokarczuk, for it satisfies one of the many human needs – the exchange of things: “objects are exchanged between people, they are used up, they are not anonymous, they have their history and they are not cheap – they have soul and are often of good quality”²⁶. However, she points out that currently there is a conviction that second-hand objects are humiliating, that people who buy them do so only because they cannot afford new things. She observes a division into those who are better off, who “consume cheap junk produced in sweatshops, which does not observe the majority of quality standards, meaning that those things will soon break down and will

¹⁹Darwin, http://darwin-online.org.uk/converted/pdf/1861_OriginNY_F382.pdf

²⁰Olga Tokarczuk, “Przyszła archeologia”, in *Moment niedźwiedzia*, (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2012), 109.

²¹Aleksander Nawarecki, “Hałda. Teologia resztek” [Landfill. Theology of waste], in *Lajerman*, (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, 2010), 50.

²²Nawarecki.

²³Nawarecki.

²⁴Olga Tokarczuk, “Feralne psy”, in *Moment niedźwiedzia*, (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2012), 58.

²⁵Olga Tokarczuk, “Śmieci, śmieci”, in *Moment niedźwiedzia*, (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2012), 119.

²⁶Tokarczuk, 120.

end up in the ever-growing pile of trash flooding us²⁷, and those who are worse off – scavengers, prospectors, willing to exchange or give away their goods. In Tokarczuk, exchanging goods could be the real answer to the problem of overconsumption we are dealing with today.

Water washes ashore new treasures, which have been cleansed from their past: “meanwhile instead of amber and pebbles, other treasures can be found – such as a small plastic toy soldier whose ranks and affiliation have been washed away, and so nobody knows which army he served and what happened to him”²⁸. Tokarczuk often employs this motif; in the short story *Skoczek* [Jumper] (*Gra na wielu bębenkach*) [Playing multiple drums], the protagonists walk on a beach on a day following a night storm. Compared to their previous excursion, new elements have appeared: “there was plenty of waste on the beach: a string of seaweed, branches, sticks, sometimes entwined with plastic more colorful than expected”²⁹. The phrase “more colorful than expected” [nadspodziewanie] is interesting here – it suggests that the plastic was not pale despite its contact with water; the color remained vibrant. Water “precedes any form, it is the foundation of any creation”³⁰, and “submerging in water symbolizes a return to what was there before the form, that is complete regeneration and rebirth”³¹. Water is in itself a symbol of life, but it can also give new life via the initiation ritual. However, plastic immersed in water cannot take advantage of its beneficial properties, for it is synthetic and as such does not contain the element of life – hence water is unable to change its properties. Tokarczuk calls this waste “special”, for it is “sterilized with sea water, scrutinized with the tongue of waves”³².

Waste management, waste disposal, the work of garbage trucks are a cultural taboo. All man wants is to quickly get rid of waste, without considering where it will end up. Unfortunately, it turns out that typically waste is not recycled – it ends up in an isolated space, i.e., a landfill. As marginalized spaces, landfills are located far from cities. Julia Fiedorczuk observes that “a landfill locates itself on the borderline between civilization and wilderness – as a substance, waste is permanently in a transitional state”³³. Some waste can undergo biodegradation, and hence be useful and beneficial for the environment. However, other waste constitutes a harmful, or even dangerous element for the natural environment. For Fiedorczuk, the transitional zone between the natural and the synthetic is important in the context of waste (which contains organic and inorganic substances)³⁴. However, there is no doubt that plastic is alien and synthetic due to its nature. It does not constitute a material of the same kind as glass; as waste, it has its own, separate container so that that it can be isolated in the segregation process, and then subjected to recycling. Landfills show us that we ourselves exclude waste from our visual space, we push it away from ourselves, we do not want to see it. Every appearance of waste in an urban or domestic space where it should not be becomes a sign that there is a mistake in our limited world, which distorts our sense of security.

²⁷Tokarczuk, 121.

²⁸Tokarczuk, “Przyszła archeologia”, 109.

²⁹Olga Tokarczuk, “Skoczek”, in *Gra na wielu bębenkach*, (Wałbrzych: Wydawnictwo Ruta, 2001), 213.

³⁰Mircea Eliade, *Traktat o historii religii* [Treatise on the History of Religions], translated into Polish by Jan-Wierusz Kowalski, (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1966), 189.

³¹Eliade.

³²Tokarczuk, “Przyszła archeologia”, 109.

³³Julia Fiedorczuk, *Cyborg w ogrodzie. Wprowadzenie do ekokrytyki* [Cyborg in a garden. Introduction to ecocriticism], (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Katedra, 2015), 139.

³⁴Fiedorczuk, 138.

The already mentioned essay *Feralne psy* describes a book by Jean Rolin, who “looks where we do not want to look, and once we do, we do not want to see”³⁵, i.e., stray dogs – excluded from civilization, that will lead travellers to landfills, slums, empty squares once occupied by street markets, construction sites, industrial areas, and railway sidings – to areas occupied by excluded populations. According to Tokarczuk, the book “outlines another reality, inferior and marginalized, but existing next to the human one in a complex dependency, in which many of us are entangled”³⁶. Those places constitute a space for the excluded, which is clear in the novel *Drive your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*, in which a female dog locked up in a dark shed with rusted bikes, plastic barrels, and other trash appears: “[t]he Dog was standing on a pile of planks, tied to the wall by a string around her neck. What else immediately caught my eye was a pile of excrement”³⁷.

Although we separate ourselves from waste (which is a product of our actions), we create special, secluded spaces for it, it still appears where we do not want to see it. We cannot separate marginal places from our lives, for they will still constitute its environment. Man is a part of the environment: there is a close correlation between human physiology and the space man occupies. By interfering with the environment, we interfere with ourselves. Waste overlooks this line drawn by humanity, it can easily cross it and appear where it is not supposed to, and even cross man’s physical line and become a part of us. External waste permeates our organisms. Elements of microplastic can enter our bodies by consuming fish from polluted oceans. Man becomes a part of what he has produced. Perhaps the man of tomorrow will consist of waste produced by our generation, which will be a direct result of excessive exploitation of the natural environment.

In *Śmieci, śmieci* (*Moment niedźwiedzia*) there is a specific account of Tokarczuk’s stay in Switzerland. Soon after arriving in the country, Tokarczuk received a detailed instruction for recycling waste; she herself observes that “segregating this waste was slowly putting me in a state close to meditation”³⁸ – she noticed the complexity of the world consisting of various elements. Most containers were made of several different types of materials; for example, bread bags are made of plastic and paper, which need to be separated from each other. For Tokarczuk, recycling was “a lesson in analytical thinking”, decomposing into the prime factors. Jan Wolski observes that it constitutes “a description of a significant aspect of life in the Western civilization – or perhaps we should more accurately call it spiritual life”³⁹.

Throwing things away is a new human ritual – it is an orderly, symbolic act (getting rid of something we no longer need). In the essay Tokarczuk stresses that segregation brings her joy, but – as a careful observer – she also notices that for others it is a source of relief, it is even celebratory in a way. People take part in the “happy celebration of throwing trash away”⁴⁰.

³⁵Tokarczuk, “Feralne psy”, 55.

³⁶Tokarczuk, 59.

³⁷Olga Tokarczuk, *Drive your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*, translated into English by Antonia Lloyd-Jones (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions), 39-40.

³⁸Tokarczuk, “Śmieci, śmieci”, 115.

³⁹Jan Wolski, “*Obrazek jak z dziwacznej bajki....* Olga Tokarczuk w Szwajcarii” [A picture like from a bizarre fairytale... OT in Switzerland], in *Światy Olgi Tokarczuk* [World of Olga Tokarczuk], edited by M. Rabizo-Birek, M. Pocałun – Dydcz, A. Bienias, (Rzeszów: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego, 2013), 210.

⁴⁰Tokarczuk, “Śmieci, śmieci”, 117.

One day I was invited for a coffee. I was watching how the guests – while discussing modern theater – poured cream from tiny cups, automatically tearing aluminum lids from plastic small plastic bowls, discretely licking them and putting them away to the designated box. Pure habit in the service of ecology⁴¹.

Tokarczuk recycled some of her Swiss experiences in the short story *Góra wszystkich świętych*, which takes place in Switzerland:

The coffee jar was passed from one person to another, coffee being poured into cups like a dark, steaming stream. Next, the nuns eagerly reached for cream cups. Old fingers delicately pulled golden aluminum lids and poured cream into cups. Next, the nuns tore the lids away completely, and immediately put them on their tongues, like an aluminum Host. The tongues skillfully, with one lick, left the lids clean and perfectly shiny. Later, the meticulous tongues went inside the container to remove every tiny drop of cream. The nuns licked the cream eagerly and efficiently with a gesture they had repeated hundreds of times. Now the paper band had to be torn from the plastic container. The nuns' nails skillfully tore where the paper was glued and took the paper off with a triumph. As a result of all those operations, there were three recyclables in front of each nun: plastic, paper, and aluminum⁴².

As a side note, Wolski points out inconsistencies in Tokarczuk's observations: "collecting such lids is a very common hobby in Switzerland. It is a kind of philately – collecting coffee cream lids"⁴³. Regardless of this inconsistency, it is interesting how it was presented in the short story; this aspect deserves attention. The nuns meticulously disassembled coffee cream containers. Tokarczuk uses Christian symbolism here, connecting the round shape of the lids with the Host. The Host (Latin *hostia* – sacrifice, offering) is a round wafer made of wheat flour which constitutes the Body of Christ. In the Christian tradition the Eucharist is an initiation sacrament, which "both completes and is the last stage of initiation, for this is where Christ's sacrifice culminates"⁴⁴. According to Eliade, the Eucharist incorporates followers in the mystical Body of Christ, the Church⁴⁵. Commonality is another connection between Eucharist and recycling – the Church, as a community, is connected and strives for salvation through the Eucharist; recycling, although it relies on individual work and segregating waste according to materials it is made of, is an action undertaken in order to provide a clean planet for future generations. The Eucharist is permeation: by accepting the Body of Christ Christians become Christ. A symbolic acceptance of the aluminum Host into the community, and mutual permeation with human carnality take place, supposedly leading us to salvation. The Eucharist makes a promise: just like Christ becomes eternal, so do we. Accepting a synthetic, eternal piece of material in the form of the Host, allows us to join the Community. Recycling is a form of salvation; something that will allow us to survive.

Moreover, the introduction of the protagonist of *Góra wszystkich świętych*, as well as its author, resembles an initiation, which is the same as an ontological transition of the existential

⁴¹Tokarczuk, 116.

⁴²Tokarczuk, "Góra wszystkich świętych", 156. .

⁴³Wolski, "Obrazek jak z dziwacznej bajki.... Olga Tokarczuk w Szwajcarii", 206.

⁴⁴Andrzej Megger, "Eucharystia w procesie wtajemniczenia chrześcijańskiego", *Roczniki Teologiczne*, (August 2016): 21.

⁴⁵Mircea Eliade, *Historia wierzeń i idei religijnych, t. II Od Guatamy Buddy do początków chrześcijaństwa* [History of Religious Ideas, Volume 2], translation into Polish by Stanisław Tokarski, (Warsaw: Instytut Wydawniczy PAX, 1994), 228. English version – translated by Willard R. Trask, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

order⁴⁶. During an initiation, a novice is presented with the concept of the world of a given society. In this case, it is segregating waste – for as we are well aware, today it is not so clear what a given object is actually made of, and what substance was originally used to make it. These are some questions that modern man needs to ask himself. During an initiation, novices get access to this knowledge – disassembling a coffee cream container into three parts. One container consists of three different substances, almost like the Holy Trinity. Eliade observes that most initiatory attempts more or less clearly imply a ritualistic death followed by resurrection or rebirth; a new man returns to life, undertaking a new lifestyle. The initiatory death signifies the end of childhood, ignorance, and secularism⁴⁷.

Death is a deconstruction of a container, and putting those deconstructed elements in colorful segregation bins symbolizes a new birth, in a different form. Is this not the essence of recycling? An object becomes useless, but it returns in a different form. Segregation allows us to come into contact with the primary absolute and continuously recreate creation. Man creates something from natural (wood, stone) or synthetic (i.e., man-made) substances, and then reshapes them once they are used. According to Eliade, any ritualistic repetition of cosmogony is preceded by a symbolic return to <<Chaos>>; in order for the old world to be recreated, it needs to be annihilated first⁴⁸. In *Góra wszystkich świętych* recycling becomes a ritual – it is performed by the nuns with reverence. There are older, used things in the monastery, such as “a table worn off by being used for centuries”⁴⁹, and “colorful recycling bins were the only modern objects in that room”⁵⁰. The nuns perform a daily deconstruction ritual during their morning coffee, which takes place automatically – they participate in the spiritual life together, because they have found a new way of existing contained in the three recyclables: plastic, paper, and aluminum. For what is segregation of waste if not a new ritual of 21st century man? This sight makes the protagonist think, because:

I too will be one day deconstructed and everything I am made of will return to its place. The ultimate recycling. What is left from a portion of coffee cream after this absolving ritual are parts which have nothing in common, they become separate, belong to different categories. Where are the flavor and texture? Where is the thing which they were harmoniously co-creating only a while ago?⁵¹.

Waste segregation is like the decomposition of the body after death. The whole seems elusive to us, and in fact we are only a collection of elements comprising our body, and we too will soon be subject to ultimate decomposition, incorporated into the cycle of nature.

Is life without plastic possible? A vision of a post-plastic world is shown in the short story *Kalendarz ludzkich świąt* [Calendar of human holidays], in which plastic has been consumed by bacteria bred for that purpose. The bacteria were supposed to consume only plastic ocean waste,

⁴⁶Mircea Eliade, *Inicjacja, obrzędy, stowarzyszenia tajemne* [Rites and Symbols of Initiation], translation into Polish by Krzysztof. Kocjan, (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 1997), 8.

⁴⁷Eliade, 10.

⁴⁸Eliade, 11.

⁴⁹O. Tokarczuk, “Góra wszystkich świętych”, 154.

⁵⁰Tokarczuk, 155.

⁵¹Tokarczuk, 184.

but “with time they moved to land and consumed all plastic around the world”⁵². This situation turns out to be fatal: “only smoldered skeletons were left from objects made of synthetic materials, a phantom of human civilization”⁵³. Since then, metal has been used – but there was a shortage of it resulting in high prices – as well as cheaper raw materials, such as wood and rubber.

Moreover, the short story presents a world gone awry, which is not surprising due to it being a bizarre short story – humanity finally solved the problem of overwhelming plastic, but it turns out that in fact our civilization was founded on plastic (perhaps *Plasticocene* is a more accurate term than *Anthropocene*): “the plastic disaster destroyed not only houses, factories, and hospitals, but it also questioned some notions”⁵⁴. It turns out that it is the foundation on which man’s might is constructed. Plastic, which in itself is very durable, is an eternal form of life. What turns out to be the decisive factor in terms of man’s greatness and the durability of his civilization is the durability of the synthetic materials he invented. However, those durable elements become autonomous, they detach themselves from man and start to function in a way similar to AI algorithms. On the one hand it helps us solve problems we cannot deal with and it is helpful in many areas of life, such as medicine, but on the other, it also poses a threat, because we find ourselves unable to control it – we are both its creators (we produce it in factories), and victims (we cannot control what happens to synthetic materials once they lose their utilitarian function for man).

Sister Ann – the protagonist of *Góra wszystkich świętych* – goes to India to find new nuns for her monastery, because “she read somewhere that there is still holiness to be found in India”⁵⁵. In spite of the long journey, she does not find holiness, but she sees a cemetery of holy cows, a place where “pariahs bring carcasses of holy cows so that they do not contaminate the city. They just leave them there in the scorching sun, and nature does the rest”⁵⁶. In Hinduism cows represent the divine, natural goodness, which is why they are protected and worshipped. Andrzej Szyszko-Bohusz stresses that cows, “which none is allowed to kill”⁵⁷, have a special place among sacred animals. Cows also have a rich symbolic meaning. Cirlot points out the association of cows with the earth and moon, and stresses the fact that many lunar goddesses have cow horns, such as the Egyptian Isis (in fact, the cow was her incarnation)⁵⁸. This animal blesses humanity and the universe with life-giving power. The cow’s special place in Hinduism allows us to associate it with the *sacrum*. In his *Treatise on the History of Religions* Mircea Eliade points out that every definition of religious life so far has one thing in common – each juxtaposes the *sacrum* (holiness, being sacred) and religious life with the *profane* (secularity, commonness) and secular life⁵⁹. The *sacrum* is closely tied with history, because it always fully

⁵²Olga Tokarczuk, “Kalendarz ludzkich świąt”, in *Opowiadania bizarne* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2018), 205.

⁵³Tokarczuk.

⁵⁴Tokarczuk, 212.

⁵⁵Tokarczuk, 177.

⁵⁶Tokarczuk, 195.

⁵⁷Andrzej Szyszko-Bohusz, *Hinduizm, buddyzm, islam* [Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam] (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich 1990), 21.

⁵⁸According to Cirlot: “Vac, the feminine aspect of Brahma, is known as the ‘melodious Cow’ and as the ‘Cow of abundance’, the first description stemming from the idea of the world’s creation out of sound, while the second—as hardly needs be said—comes from its function of nourishing the world with its milk, the fine dust of the Milky Way”. Juan-Eduardo Cirlot Laport, “Cow”, in *A Dictionary of Symbols*, translated into English by John Sage, New York: Dover Publications.

⁵⁹Eliade, *Treatise on the History of Religions*, 7.

manifests itself in a certain historical situation; the most personal and transcendental mystical experiences always carry the mark of a given moment in history⁶⁰. In the analyzed passage of *Góra wszystkich świętych* the cow, a sacred animal in Hinduism, belongs to the sacrum. A cows' cemetery is a mystical, holy place, which is invaded by the profane in the form of death. Carcasses of dead animals should decompose according to the laws of nature, so that they can return to the natural cycle. However, something else happens – what is left is trash which the cows must have mistaken for food. Trash is man-made, and as such belongs to the profane. This picture shows the consequence of excessive waste production and mismanagement, but first and foremost, it is a hierophany. The profane enters the sacrum with the consumption of a string, bottle cap, piece of rubber, or plastic cup by sacred animals. According to Eliade, hierophany is a manifestation of holiness, every intrusion of the sacrum into the profane – every example of hierophany reveals the coexistence of these two entities: the sacrum and the profane, spirit and matter, eternity and mortality, etc.⁶¹ The sacrum can manifest itself anywhere, it is not limited by any form. Anna is seeking genuine holiness in India, but she does not find the promised revelation there – instead, she finds a cemetery of holy cows, which were supposed to embody that holiness. And this holiness is invaded by an alien element – the profane, which distorts its reception. The sacrum typically manifests itself in an object which belongs to the profane⁶², but in this case the profane manifests itself in the sacrum – a reversed hierophany – trash appears in the place of holy cows. The profane distorts holiness, it forbids access to it.

In the works quoted here waste appears in different contexts. In Tokarczuk, the mention of waste behaves like waste – it sneaks by, sometimes blending into the literary space. It may not constitute an emphasized element of a given text, like in the case of the essay *Ogródki działkowe i pola golfowe*, where it appears in an unobvious place – but nonetheless its unquestionable presence distorts relations with nature. Sometimes it becomes more visible, like in the novel *Flights*, where a separate chapter is devoted to it. A plastic bag becomes a threat in many texts by Tokarczuk, where it manifests both its presence and absence. Waste appears as an odd element of reality, which cannot be ignored – but it is also unclear what to do about it. However, this poetics does not connote only negative meanings, for it contains a certain connection. Tokarczuk proposes that we treat waste segregation (which we see as something positive) as a new type of spiritual activity, which is supposed to be an answer to today's problems, including the climate catastrophe. The problem of waste will not disappear – quite the opposite will happen, as waste will become a part of our society, reality, landscape, and – ultimately – us.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

⁶⁰Eliade, 7-8.

⁶¹Eliade, 35.

⁶²Eliade, 34.

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KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT:

The paper discusses the issue of waste and plastic, especially plastic bags, in the works by Olga Tokarczuk. The author considers what waste is in today's civilization. Waste is a marginalized, omitted element in the human existence. This character of waste is used by Tokarczuk in her prose, where waste appears in full sight only to disappear a moment later. She presents plastic products as an example of a new, better species, which may prove to have surpassed man in terms of survival of the fittest. In her essays and short stories examples of a new spirituality related to waste segregation can also be observed.

spirituality

W A S T E

plastic

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