

Justifying Tenderness – the History and Modernity of a Literary-Critical Concept

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1.

Olga Tokarczuk's Nobel-Prize speech and her volume of essays published soon after, shed light on "tenderness" as both a key concept in literary criticism¹ and a fashionable word, which might well compete for the 'word-of-the-year' award. It became part of journalistic and political discourse, coexisting with current interests of the humanities and in the renewed interest in affectiveness and eco-critical contexts, which are highlighted by the Nobel-laureate. Given how the Nobel-Prize speech propelled this word's international career, it has been

¹ Olga Tokarczuk, *Czuły narrator* [*The tender narrator*] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2020).

pointed out somewhat begrudgingly that Tokarczuk failed to acknowledge its local contexts of usage. Therefore, any attempt at describing the current status of “tenderness” as a literary-critical concept must take note of this complication.

2.

The literary-critical origins of tenderness can be found in the esthetics of Enlightenment’s sentimentalism. As demonstrated in a well-known essay by Teresa Kostkiewiczowa², the uses of this word in Polish were influenced by the philosophical writings of Jean Jacques Rousseau. “Tenderness of the heart” started to be used for describing the benefits of one’s return to nature. It thus became a disposition of the subjects, co-created by literature. A tender human being was thus able to find a new measure of all things in the emotional sphere. This emotional turn, however, avoided rashness. Rather, the dominant emotions of the tender protagonist were, as Kostkiewiczowa declared, “longing, sorrow, melancholic contemplation and a peculiar passivity towards the world”.³ The literature of sentimentalism was thus reluctant towards any formal or linguistic innovation and supported stylistic norm and simplicity of expression. From today’s perspective this might seem like avoiding the problem of the artificiality of language altogether and hypersensitivity to the meaning of linguistic borrowings, but one should remember that the program of “tender” literary language was at the time an innovation, as well as a critical response to the ornamentation of classicism and Rococo, and the related mannerism of forms of expression. It was for these reasons that the leading poet of Polish sentimentalism, Franciszek Karpiński, asserted that “[t]he concept of things, a tender heart and beautiful patterns, these are more-than-sufficient sources of speech”⁴. In contrast to British sentimentalists, Polish thinkers dispensed with the category of genius in their discussions of originality, because they believed the gift of artistic creativity could be bestowed on any person whose feelings are honest and strong. This self-restraint limited the literature of sentimentalism to a fairly narrow range of themes and images, which led to its typification (common themes included love, friendship, nature, God) and to a banalization of sorts.

In its literary-critical applications, “tenderness” [Pol. *czułość*] renounced some of the senses familiar to the then speakers of Polish. Samuel Bogumił Linde’s *Słownik języka polskiego* [A dictionary of the Polish language] lists a range of meanings of *czułość*, including “the power of feeling, affection”, as well as “emotion”, “being moved”, “vigilance” and “sleeplessness”⁵. Sometimes the term ‘tenderness’ was used in reference to a special sharpening of the senses, the ability to react to danger, and a sober and unemotional testing of occurrences. This may explain why Linde recalled the definition developed by the Vilnius rationalist philosopher,

² Teresa Kostkiewiczowa. *Klasycyzm – sentymentalizm – rokoko. Szkice o prądach literackich polskiego Oświecenia* [Classicism – sentimentalism – rococo. Sketches on literary movements of Polish Enlightenment] (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1975).

³ Kostkiewiczowa, 280.

⁴ Kostkiewiczowa, 229.

⁵ Samuel Bogumił Linde, *Słownik języka polskiego*, t. I [A dictionary of the Polish language. Vol. I] (Warszawa: Drukarnia Księży Pijarów, 1807): 384–385.

Jędrzej Śniadecki, who wrote in his *Teoria jestestw organicznych* [*A theory of organic beings*] that tenderness is “the power residing in the nerves, whose every touch triggers emotion”⁶. The scholar reaffirmed the senses of ‘tenderness’ still relevant in modern Polish, where the word *czułość* is equivalent to English ‘sensitivity’ and used in such contexts as sensitivity of the photographic paper or sensitivity of an apparatus.

The sentimentalist definition of tenderness was expanded in the Romanticism, which added to its complexity and multivalence. The most familiar examples of this shift can be found in the works of Adam Mickiewicz, whose ballad *Romantyczność* [*Romanticism*] argues for the need to confront “feeling and faith” with the scientific approach. In his *Wielka improwizacja* [*The great improvisation*] Mickiewicz’s protagonist Konrad confronts God in the name of emotion, declaring: “I am tender, I am strong and I am rational”. Arguing with God, Konrad deliberates whether or not “under your [i.e. God’s] governance tenderness is anarchy”⁷. Even though the Polish word *czułość* has maintained its connection to sentimentalism, the authors of Polish Romanticism were able to redefine it and imbue it with powerful tensions of meaning. This becomes visible not only in Mickiewicz’s lofty words but also in Cyprian Kamil Norwid’s poem *Czułość* [*Tenderness*]:

Czułość – bywa jak pełen wojen krzyk;
I jak szemrzących źródeł prąd,
I jako wtór pogrzebny...

*

I jak plecionka długa z włosów blond,
Na której wdowiec nosić zwykł
Zegarek srebrny – – –⁸

[literal translation]

Tenderness – can be like a scream filled with wars;
And like a simmering current of streams
And like a funerary accompaniment...

*

And like a long braid of blonde hair
On which a widower used to carry
A silver watch - - -

⁶ Linde, 385.

⁷ Adam Mickiewicz, *Dziady drezdeńskie (cz. III)* [*The Dziady of Dresden, part III*] (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich – Wydawnictwo, 2021), 61.

⁸ Cyprian Kamil Norwid, *Vade-mecum* (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich – Wydawnictwo, 1999), 100.

In a recent reading of the poem Edward Balcerzan notes:

The immense scale of this phenomenon's presence separates the poet from its definition, even a metaphorical one. The same distancing is effected by its 'extravaganza of meanings', which manifests itself in contradictory emotional behaviours, i.e. in the loud and the silent, in the gigantic and the minuscule, in the common and the singular, as well as in the honest and make-believe one⁹.

It was probably that which prevented „tenderness” from losing relevance as a literary-critical concept and why it retained its power of inspiration and the ability to stimulate a critical dialogue with the sentimental heritage. In effect, it became a crucial term for contemporary Polish literature, as exemplified by Tadeusz Różewicz's 1963 commentary to Norwid's poem, quoted above. As noted by Arkadiusz Bałajewski¹⁰, for Różewicz “the bright mystery”¹¹, as he refers to tenderness, provided him with a justification for continuing his poetic work after the Holocaust. He sees Norwid not only as an avant-garde author but also as the “father” of all avant-garde. Różewicz was not the only author in pursuit of his fascination with tenderness, as the concept was also key to the poetics of Stanisław Grochowiak, one of the most important representatives of Generation '56. In her monograph *Czułe punkty Grochowiaka*¹² [*Grochowiak's tender spots*] Beata Mytych-Forajter's provided evidence for the ongoing impact of “tenderness” and its participation in literary-critical discourses, whereas Balcerzan mentioned how this concept was central to the author of *Rozbieranie do snu* [*Bed-time undressing*].

Tenderness also gradually became one of the interpretative principles in modern literatures of Central-Eastern Europe; a concept, which controlled the flow of ideas from those regions to Poland. A piece of evidence in support of this claim is the peculiar popularity of Bohumil Hrabal's¹³ *The tender barbarian* in Poland. The title of the book gave its name to an important publishing house and a bookstore, which prints Polish, Central-European and international authors. Its creators' declarative fascination with Hrabal's work underlies the fact that “the tender barbarian” has become an umbrella term for a category of Polish and international literatures read in this country. Originally, Hrabal applied this term to his friend, the avant-garde explosionist painter Vladimír Boudník. Polish recipients welcomed the original synthesis of tenderness and an uncompromising formal innovation, whereas Boudník's life attitude, which allowed him to find exciting wonders in the most usual aspects of life in communist Prague, seemed intriguing and familiar at the same time, as it was close to the ways in which tenderness was incorporated into Polish literary projects. One should also add that Polish Bohemists entitled their collection of new interpretations of

⁹ Edward Balcerzan, „Z archiwum czułości” [„From the archive of tenderness”], *eleWator* 2 (2020): 197.

¹⁰ Arkadiusz Bałajewski, *Obecność romantyzmu* [*The presence of Romanticism*] (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2015), 175–176.

¹¹ Bałajewski, 175.

¹² Beata Mytych-Forajter, *Czułe punkty Grochowiaka. Szkice i interpretacje* [*Grochowiak's tender points. Sketches and interpretations*] (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2010).

¹³ Bohumil Hrabal, *Czuły barbarzyńca: teksty pedagogiczne* [*The tender barbarian: pedagogical texts*] (Izabelin: Świat Literacki, 1997).

Czech literature *Czuli barbarzyńcy*¹⁴, [*Tender barbarians*]. Another recently published edited volume, *Modernizm(y) słowiański(e) w anturazhu czułości*¹⁵ [*Slavic modernism(s) in the entourage of tenderness*] tries to extrapolate this category onto other modern literary cultures of Central-Eastern Europe.

3.

The now active uses of “tenderness” in Polish literary criticism are related to the above-outlined history of the term. They constitute a relatively broad collection of references, which sometimes results in innovative approaches and are testament to the fact that this expression is well-liked in Polish literature and its criticism.

The Enlightenment-sentimental genesis of tenderness is well-remembered, as argued in Grzegorz Zająć’s monograph *Czuły weredyk. Twórczość poetycka Juliana Ursyna Niemcewicza*¹⁶ [*The tender soothsayer. Poetic art of Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz*]. This concept is also well established in religious writings and their commentaries¹⁷. Of course, on the one hand, we are referring here to a highly specialized kind of circulation, which adds theological contexts to tenderness. On the other hand though, religious literary criticism activates traditions of Polish metaphysical literary criticism. This principle of relating literary works to metaphysics was highly influential in the 80s and 90s, leading to the establishment of a whole range of still productive links between tenderness and literature. Undoubtedly, this can be attributed to the initiatives of authors who put tenderness centre stage and call for the recipients’ participation in problematising it through critical commentaries.

A good example of this manner of stimulating a critical reception seem to be the works of Julia Hartwig, who authored a well-known book of poetry entitled *Czułość* (1992) [*Tenderness*]. This term was picked up by Jerzy Illg, who argued in his obituary for Hartwig (entitled *Pozostanie czułość*¹⁸ [*Tenderness will remain*]) that tenderness was a key category for understanding her works. The same category was also utilized by Agata Stankowska, who saw “tenderness for existence” as the interpretative principle of Hartwig’s poetry¹⁹. No different was the case with critical studies of Zbigniew Herbert’s work, influenced by his later poem *Czułość* [*Tenderness*], which began with a well-known incipit „Cóż ja z tobą czułości

¹⁴*Czuli barbarzyńcy 2013: o kulturze czeskiej 2013* [*Tender barbarians: on Czech culture 2013*], ed. by Dorota Siwor (Bielsko-Biała: Kolegium Nauczycielskie, 2013).

¹⁵*Modernizm(y) słowiański(e) w anturazhu czułości* [*Slavic modernism(s) in the entourage of tenderness*], ed. by Izabella Malej, Agnieszka Matusiak, Anna Paszkiewicz (Wrocław: Oficyna Wydawnicza Atut – Wrocławskie Wydawnictwo Oświatowe, 2021).

¹⁶Grzegorz Zająć, *Czuły weredyk: twórczość poetycka Juliana Ursyna Niemcewicza* [*The tender soothsayer: poetic works of Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz*] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2015).

¹⁷Jerzy Szymik, *Czułość, siła i drżenie: 50 wierszy z lat 2005–2009. Missa de spe i litanie do Matki Bożej Pszowskiej* [*Tenderness, strength and shiver: 50 poems from 2005–2009. Missa de spe and the Litany of the Blessed Mother of Pszow*] (Katowice: Księgarnia św. Jacka, 2009).

¹⁸Jerzy Illg, „Pozostanie czułość” [„Tenderness will remain”], *Znak* 9 (2017): 122–123.

¹⁹Agata Stankowska, „Czułość wobec istnienia: wokół postawy klasycznej Julii Hartwig” [„Tenderness vis-a-vis existence: on the classical stance of Julia Hartwig”], in: *Pochwała istnienia: studia o twórczości Julii Hartwig* [*In praise of existence: studies on the works of Julia Hartwig*], ed. by Barbara Kulesza-Gulczyńska, Elżbieta Winiecka (Poznań: Bogucki Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 2015), 43–52.

w końcu począć mam...”. [“What shall I do with you, oh tenderness...”]. Moreover, a volume of essays on Herbert’s works is entitled *Czułość dla minotaura*²⁰ [*Tenderness for the Minotaur*]. It was also noted that this expression was likewise favoured by Czesław Miłosz, and at least since the publication of his *Piesek przydrożny* [*The road-side dog*] it has been part of the vocabulary of literary critical commentaries on his works. Andrzej Franaszek therefore argued in a recent essay²¹ for the central role of this concept in the works of Miłosz and a few other contemporary poets. Similar motivations are behind the focus on tenderness in the analyses of the poetry of Adrianna Szymańska, Józef Baran and others. To the same category belongs the first edited volume on Janusz Szuber’s poetry (he likewise authored a poem entitled *Czułość* [*Tenderness*]). It was suggested in *Poeta czułej pamięci*²² [*A poet of tender memory*] that tenderness should be one of the main issues addressed by literary-critical discussions of Szuber’s works. This seems understandable, even if predictable, given the close links between Szuber’s poetry and that of Miłosz’s and Herbert’s. By the same token, transfers of some well-entrenched concepts from one critical circle to another emphasise uniformity in this area of contemporary Polish poetry. In a similar fashion, critical commentaries on the poetry of the New Wave generation also make references to the uses of the term ‘tenderness’. Even though Szuber belonged to this generation metrically, he debuted relatively late, i.e. in the 90s, which is why any “tenderness”-related affinities between his poems and those of his colleagues from Generation-’68 appeared later. Yet again, the context of these affinities was the metaphysical tradition of Polish literary criticism. Possibly, Jerzy Franczak’s reading of Julian Kornhauser’s poetry, entitled *Czujność, czułość*²³ [*Vigilance, tenderness*], is related to that metaphysical background. It is possible to discern in Franczak an echo of the earlier “distrust” of the New-Wave criticism, but here it is combined with the tenderness-oriented disposition, adding complexity to his stance.

A separate issue seems to be the context of applying “tenderness” within the scope of hermeneutic criticism. It maintains multivalent relationships with metaphysical and religious criticism, but it has a vocabulary of its own and specific philosophical genealogies. It is no accident that Maciej Urbanowski, in his discussion of a selection of Kazimierz Nowosielski’s poems, writes about “tenderness and shine”²⁴, because the poet himself is an active literary critic and an author of auto-commentaries, based on original applications of the language of hermeneutics and an emphasis on tenderness.²⁵ A more powerful reaction was provoked by Adrian Gleń’s 2014 monograph, grounded in the tradition of a hermeneutic literary criticism. Provocatively entitled *Czułość*²⁶, the monograph begins with a commentary on the contro-

²⁰*Czułość dla Minotaura* [*Tenderness for the Minotaur*], ed. by Józef Maria Ruszar, Magdalena Cicha (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Archidiecezji Lubelskiej „Gaudium”, 2005).

²¹Andrzej Franaszek, „Czułość” [„Tenderness”], *Znak* 6 (2021): 62–69.

²²*Poeta czułej pamięci: studia i szkice o twórczości Janusza Szubera* [*A poet of tender memory: studies and sketches on the works of Janusz Szuber*], ed. by Jolanta Pasterska, Magdalena Rabizo-Birek (Rzeszów: Biblioteka „Frazy”, 2008).

²³Jerzy Franczak, „Czujność, czułość” [„Tenderness, vigilance”, *Wielogłos* 4 (2016): 69–79.

²⁴Maciej Urbanowski, „Czułość i blask: poezja Kazimierza Nowosielskiego” [„Tenderness and shine: the poetry of Kazimierz Nowosielski”], *Zeszyty Karmelitańskie* 3 (2011): 111–115.

²⁵Kazimierz Nowosielski, *Czułość i ślad: o tym, co kto pokochał* [*Tenderness and trace: about who loved what*] (Kraków: Instytut Literatury, 2021).

²⁶Adrian Gleń, *Czułość: studia i eseje o literaturze najnowszej* [*Tenderness: studies and essays on contemporary literature*] (Sopot: Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Sopotu, 2014).

versy caused by his earlier publication. As argued by Krzysztof Hoffman, that publication demonstrated excessive professionalization of the language of literary criticism, because, as he wrote, “securing hermeneutic positions is not that different from the language of classical literary studies”²⁷. Hoffman also questioned the value of the proposition which, to his mind, was based on the belief in the existence of some kind of *über*-readers, devoting themselves to reading with an “old-fashioned fervour”²⁸. In his rejoinder, Gleń acknowledged the need for a meaningful de-professionalisation of the language of criticism, but he defended fervour, which he understood to be “an individual’s engagement in reading; a kind of relentlessness in search of interpretative ideas, the joy of reading, insatiability”. He went on to say that despite numerous reservations for hermeneutics, it “legitimizes and rehabilitates the category of impression; it enables the process of identification”²⁹. He makes this stance even more poignant in the conclusion:

Why do I make tenderness the title of all the essays and sketches in this book? [...] because I find it missing from the accounts of modern poetry [...] tenderness brings hope for a change, for a long and good existence in reading. It is an empowerment of reading, a kind of intimacy between language and text which binds the author, the work and the critic in one body. Tenderness is a promise of closeness³⁰.

In his review of Gleń’s work, Wojciech Kudyba sees its affinities with the philosophy of Martin Heidegger’s philosophy, which was so important for hermeneutic criticism: “in Gleń’s critical idiolect «tenderness» becomes synonymous with Heidegger’s «concern» [...] It [...] is a vigilant being-with-the-text, keeping watch over the poem’s being”³¹.

What is striking in both critics’ line of argumentation is their customary reference to the heavily exploited contexts of Heidegger’s philosophy, which also used to lend support to some of the ideas of metaphysical criticism. But it seems that, positioned in this context, tenderness does not benefit from the achievements of modern affective criticism, including the most recent Polish studies on the role of empathy in the reception of literature³². Moreover, it does not reach out to modern, non-Heideggerean philosophy of presence, as presented by Alva Noë or Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht. In this context the perverse nature of Gleń’s proposal is somewhat mitigated and becomes similar to Adam Zagajewski’s classicising, thus hardly innovative, and unconvincing “defenses of fervour”, familiar from the turn of the previous century.

Attention should also be paid to the multiplicity and variety of the remaining usages of “tenderness”, which testify to its popularity in Polish literary criticism. The issue of tenderness

²⁷Gleń, 9.

²⁸Gleń, 8.

²⁹Gleń, 9.

³⁰Gleń, 10.

³¹Wojciech Kudyba, [a fragment of a review article], in: Gleń, fourth page of the cover.

³²Jarosław Płuciennik, *Literackie identyfikacje i oddźwięki: poetyka a empatia* [Literary identifications and resonances: poetics and empathy] (Kraków: Universitas, 2004); Anna Łebkowska, *Empatia: o literackich narracjach przełomu XX i XXI wieku* [Empathy: on literary narratives of the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries] (Kraków: Universitas, 2008).

returned in the reviews of Mariusz Grzebalski's 2013 award-winning collection of poems, entitled *W innych okolicznościach* [*Under different circumstances*]³³, even though Grzebalski's poetry is quite distant from the tradition of metaphysical writing. It is, in fact, closer to the model of poetic speech of the "bruLion" generation. In his essay on issues of literary translation criticism, Jerzy Jarniewicz asked *Can a translator afford tenderness?*³⁴, focusing on the manners of translating terms of affection. In her discussion of the documents of earlier Jewish culture Monika Sznajderman considered their "greater tenderness"³⁵. Ewa Tatar in "Kresy" combined tenderness with post-feminism in art and in the expression of lesbian love³⁶. In conversation with Marta Koronkiewicz and Paweł Kaczmarski, in turn, the well-known eco-critical poet Małgorzata Lebda declared her "tenderness for the Earth"³⁷.

4.

We have thus approached the contexts for Olga Tokarczuk's "tender narrator". As has been demonstrated, she reached for a category familiar from feminist and eco-critical criticism, and successfully triggered a major discussion on modern literature. This category is eagerly utilized by ideologically different strands of literary criticism, which allowed the writer to communicate with recipients from varied backgrounds. I have already mentioned that the writer is sometimes accused of ignoring the Polish or Central-European origin of tenderness. It is somewhat surprising, however, that commentaries on her Nobel-Prize speech do not mention a different approach to the concept, i.e., one which reaches to the philosophical background of James Hillman's³⁸ "psychology of depth". It is to that background that the Polish Nobel-laureate makes reference when she says that "tenderness is an art of personifying"³⁹ and "[c]reating stories means constantly bringing things to life, giving an existence to all the tiny pieces of the world that are represented by human experiences". Similarly, she argues that "[t]enderness personalises everything" and "[i]t is thanks to tenderness that the teapot starts to talk"⁴⁰. It ought to be remembered that since the 70s Hillman has been developing a version of a Jungian psychoanalysis based on the neoplatonic certainty that the "I" is the soul, whose every experience and observation changes everything into a "naively"

³³Krzysztof Lisowski, „Nieuchronność i czułość” [„Inevitability and tenderness”] *Książki* 5 (2014): 20–21; Iwona Smolka, „Uważność i czułość” [„Mindfulness and tenderness”], *Nowa Dekada Krakowska* 3/4 (2014): 18–21.

³⁴Jerzy Jarniewicz, „Czy tłumacz może pozwolić sobie na czułość?: spieszczania a ekwiwalencja emocjonalna w przekładzie literackim” [„Can a translator afford tenderness? Terms of affection and emotional equivalence in literary translation”], *Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne. Seria Literacka* 23 (2014): 293–304.

³⁵„Większa czułość. Monika Sznajderman z rozmowie z Agnieszką Rzoncą”, [„A greater tenderness Monika Sznajderman in conversation with Agnieszka Rzonca”] *Znak* 6 (2017): 30–35.

³⁶Ewa Tatar, „Przesłuchując miłość lesbijską: czy czułość, zmysłowość, szaleństwo i miłość lesbijska dają szansę sztuce na przepisania narracji «kobietych»” [„Interviewing lesbian love: do love, sensuality, madness and lesbian love give art a chance to rewrite „female” narratives”], *Kresy* 8 (2008): 182–198.

³⁷„Czułość do ziemi. Z Małgorzatą Lebda rozmawiają Marta Koronkiewicz i Paweł Kaczmarski” [„Tenderness for the earth. Marta Koronkiewicz and Paweł Kaczmarski in conversation with Małgorzata Lebda”] *Odra* 5 (2017): 156–157.

³⁸James Hillman, *Re-wizja psychologii* [*Revisoning psychology*], transl. by Jerzy Korpanty (Warszawa: MT Biznes, 2016); James Hillman, *Uzdrowiające fikcje: poetyka psychoterapii: Freud, Jung, Adler* [*Healing fiction*], transl. by Jerzy Korpanty (Warszawa: MT Biznes, Laurum, 2016).

³⁹Tokarczuk, 287.

⁴⁰Tokarczuk, 288.

personified being, so as to “psychologise” or “spiritualise” the entire experienced world. This is why the relationship between the soul and the experienced fragment of the world is based on the relationship between Amor and Psyche; the “I-soul” exists thanks to the reflex of love which turns every object into active beings. Hence Tokarczuk’s definition, which declares that “[t]enderness is the most modest form of love”⁴¹, whose effect will be, among other things, a speaking – personalised – teapot and many other, somewhat fairy-tale like metamorphoses of subjectified reality.

Tokarczuk’s definition of tenderness, based on Hillman, on closer inspection reveals its Platonic provenance. It is only once this identification has been completed that one can begin to look for any links with traditions of sentimentalism or Romanticism. For Polish literary criticism this is a novel approach, although in her Nobel-Prize speech Tokarczuk drew on an immediate connection with the very current issue of eco-critical literature. Perhaps even more surprising was the term “tender narrator”, which links the issue of tenderness with problems of modern culture and with such areas of literary studies as narratology studies and poetics. Musing on the possibility of bringing to life a tender “fourth-person narrator”, Tokarczuk juxtaposes them with the first-person narrator, marred by cognitive, artistic and cultural limitations. Useful knowledge of different types of the narrative may well be evidence of the delayed-in-time impact of Polish structuralism, which was quick to introduce its vocabulary to all types of schools in Poland and lent terminology to literary criticism. Tokarczuk’s prose would thus be continuously analysed in terms of its usage of the concept of the “narrator” and other constructs of the structuralist school of literary studies. The unexpected combination of the narrator as a “professional” term, with the non-literary, everyday word “tender” procured terminological freshness and raised the interest of the critical and literary environment. It also ensured the “memorability” of the term in common, non-literary usages.

5.

Proof of the above can be seen in the reception of the terms “tenderness” and “tender narrator” in global circulation, which followed Tokarczuk’s Nobel-Prize speech. In a conversation with Tokarczuk’s translators in the „Los Angeles Review of Books”⁴², one can see how quickly these new concepts were being mapped onto new cultural and topical spaces. Olga Bagińska-Shinzato, Tokarczuk’s translator into Portuguese, is convinced that tenderness helps the writer describe Polish issues “poetically”, and thus make them universal. She emphasizes the basic nature of this emotion, which helps the reader’s imagination feel more at ease in worlds which, like the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth of the 18th c., can be very distant from the experience of her readers. (This is probably an allusion to a favourable review of *The Books of Jacob*). Bagińska-Shinzato states that “Olga’s texts are like images, tender studies in

⁴¹Tokarczuk.

⁴²„Fullfilling the Mission: A Conversation with Olga Tokarczuk’s Translators (by Jennifer Croft)”, *Los Angeles Review of Books*. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/fulfilling-the-mission-a-conversation-with-olga-tokarczuku-translators/> (accessed 18.06.2022).

the human soul, body and mind”⁴³. The Korean translator, Sungeun Choi, likewise acknowledges the “poeticism” of Tokarczuk’s word, as it describes regular people, stating that “Olga’s works are full of tenderness for the world and others (not only people but also animals and plants)”⁴⁴, thanks to which she is able to combine the local with the supralocal. In her view, the prose of the author of *Flights* challenges the dominant concepts of world literature and proposes a new way of introducing a global dimension to literature. This view is shared both by her Czech translator, Petr Vidlák, and by the German Lothar Quinkenstein, who perceive tenderness as a factor allowing literature access to what is local and finding a new way of transgressing that locality.

In his discussion of the English edition of *Prowadź swój pług przez kości umarłych* [*Drive your plow over the bones of the dead*] Tarun K. Saint highlights formal innovation, which stems from the application of the tender narrator’s perspective⁴⁵. In contrast to the unreliable narrator, typical of criminal novels, Tokarczuk opts for a tender narrative, which brings about the fourth-person narrator. It is thanks to that narrator that the “hyper-empathetic” protagonist of the novel, the eco-activist Janina Duszejka, is a likeable person, despite the funny and ironic aspects of her actions. According to Saint, the tender, fourth-person narrator, is driven by their desire to establish stronger bonds with the ecosphere and hints at subsequent correspondences between the life of an individual, the social world and nature. The critic also believes that the title of the novel, which is a quotation from William Blake, triggers an image of the Holocaust; the genocide of Polish Jews, which haunts Polish culture. This is why tenderness helps one go beyond the history of “extreme violence”. Finally, tenderness becomes a mode of talking about the world in the era of the Anthropocene; “a crucial avenue of resistance in the age of relentless climate change [...] pandemics, rising authoritarianism and consequent fragmentation of human connectedness in the name of the public good”⁴⁶. This brings the critic to the complimentary conclusion that “the murder mystery will never be the same as a result of Tokarczuk’s deployment of the tender narrator in this distinctive novel.”⁴⁷.

This concept has also entered international literary studies. The German scholar Georgina Nugent-Folan suggested looking for the presence of the tender narrator not only in modern literature but also in writings before Tokarczuk⁴⁸. Inspired by quotations from Tokarczuk’s Nobel-Prize speech, she presented a more precise definition of the tender narrator, in which she points to the concept’s intelligibility (its non-hermetic-ness), stimulating a holistic and universal perspective, its rooting in nature, its fragmentary manifestation

⁴³ „Fullfilling the Mission”.

⁴⁴ „Fullfilling the Mission”.

⁴⁵Tarun K. Saint, *Reinventing Literary Form: Olga Tokarczuk’s ‘Tender Narrator’ in Our Times*, <https://thewire.in/books/reinventing-literary-form-olga-tokarczukuks-tender-narrator-in-our-times> (accessed 18.06.2022).

⁴⁶Tarun K. Saint, *Reinventing*.

⁴⁷Tarun K. Saint.

⁴⁸Georgina Nugent-Folan, *Olga Tokarczuk’s Tender Narrator & the Tender, Furiuos Narrators* – wykład online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T-2gHD-u1Kw&t=1260s> (dostęp 18.06.2022).

which leads to constellation-like compositions, the interchanges of micro- and macroscales in search of infinite similarities between phenomena, developing a new kind of realism, etc. The critic notes attempts at the fourth-person narrative in the works of Samuel Beckett, whose *The unnamable* introduces a protagonist for whom there is no pronoun capable of naming their dispersed existence in what is being uttered. She also offers criticism of the 1st-person narrative and searches for other ways of naming the sender. Another example analysed by Nugent-Folan are the works of the Korean poet Kim Hyesoon, who was wondering in her commentary to her autobiography which perspective would be adopted by the narrator-death, symbolising the absence of the described individual. Hyesoon too underlines that the 1st-person narrative is incapable of capturing that perspective, which is why she declares that all individual deaths taken together create a distinct, all-embracing perspective. Wondering about the possible level of the narrative in this scenario, the poet envisages a “sixth- or seventh-person narrator”. A different example still is for the Munich scholar the prose of the Korean novelist Han Hang. In her work *Human Acts* she describes people participating in South-Korean democratic protests in 1980, which were concluded with a massacre in the city of Gwangju. The story recalls the perspective of a killed boy, Kang Dong-ho, some of his other friends who were also murdered at that time, his only surviving friend and Kang Dong-ho’s mother. The writer was trying to find a dimension in which the Gwangju victims still exist after death and become a relevant reference point for everybody who speaks after their death. Together, they create a universal and collective perspective which still proves to be active in the public life of South Korea. As can be seen, Nugent-Folan was able to find evidence of narrators similar to the tender, fourth-person narrator in works which were culturally distant from one another, thus joining other critical voices, which declared that this concept allows Tokarczuk to open new possibilities for studies in world literature.

A few additional remarks on the Nobel-Prize speech were put forward by Li Yinan, who analysed the reception of Polish literature in China⁴⁹. She focused on the reception of works by Polish Nobel-laureates, in particular on Tokarczuk’s works, which were published in China in the last twenty years, and emphasized how well-received the category of tenderness and the “tender narrator” were. In this geographically distant reception, the critic is searching for a clear national distinguishing factor, which could make Tokarczuk’s prose stand out on the biggest publishing market in the world. This probably explains peculiar statements, like the following:

This well-balanced emotional diagnosis becomes the general message of literature, whereas the words uttered by the Polish writer become emblematic of the new national position of Polish writers, who cannot remain indifferent to the way the world is turning and to the manner in which automatization progresses uncontrollably⁵⁰.

⁴⁹Li Yinan, „Czuła narracja: nowe oblicze literatury polskiej w oczach Chińczyków” [„The tender narrative: the new face of Polish literature in the eyes of the Chinese”], *Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne. Seria Literacka* 40 (2021): 21–51.

⁵⁰Li Yinan, 25.

The category of tenderness seems to be of particular importance for Chinese critics. Zhao Gang writes that:

Tenderness is the author's relationship to the world. It is an instinctive sympathy for all the "non-I's". It is thanks to this delicate brush that she describes thousands of objects in the world, so that people, events, objects, surroundings, etc. are covered in a layer of a soft, spiritual light, which resonates with the most subtle part of the reader's heart⁵¹.

It was for this reason that Li Yinan entitled her article *The tender narrative: the new face of Polish literature in the eyes of the Chinese*.

6.

Thanks to the Nobel-Prize speech by Olga Tokarczuk, "tenderness" and the "tender narrator" have become probably the only contemporary Polish literary critical concepts to have entered international circulation. Even though these concepts originated in literary cultures of Central-Eastern Europe and play an important role in the history of Polish contemporary literary criticism, the writer proposed a fairly innovative definition of "tenderness" in literature, which, alongside the "tender narrator" concept, have been bestowed with new interpretative possibilities. Neither sentimentalism nor Romanticism resonate with international audiences; nor are references to metaphysical publications or hermeneutic interpretations discernible in them. Rather, the notion of "tenderness" is associated with eco-critical contexts and becomes incorporated into debates on the concepts of world literature. The above-mentioned Li Yinan's article testifies to the fact that "tenderness" and "the tender narrator" have become hyper-categories of international circulation, through which the entire Polish literature is now interpreted. Faced with this unexpected and paradoxical situation, Polish literary criticism will have to explain its own tenderness and the tenderness of Polish literature. One benefit of this will be the opportunity to talk about Polish and Central European history of the concept.

translated by Justyna Rogos-Hebda

⁵¹Li Yinan, 48.

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KEYWORDS

TENDERNESS

OLGA TOKARCZUK

ABSTRACT:

This paper outlines the history and modern usages of the concept of “tenderness” in Polish literary criticism. It introduces the genealogy and origins in the esthetics of sentimentalism, along with its romantic modifications and its place in Polish literature and modern criticism. Modern usages of tenderness in national literary criticism have been discussed, followed by the analysis of the notions of “tenderness” and “the tender narrator” from Olga Tokarczuk’s Nobel Prize speech. The final part focuses on selected examples of international reception, which combines tenderness with eco-criticism and issues of world literature.

literary criticism

tender narrator

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