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Transgression and Tenderness. Olga Tokarczuk in Comparative Perspective

Olga Tokarczuk. Comparative Perspectives. Eds. Lidia Wiśniewska and Jakub Lipski. New York–London: Routledge, 2023

Olga Tokarczuk's literary discourse has for years coincided with the comparative technique implied in her poetics, which the author herself compared to a constellation (Tokarczuk 2019: 22). Following a number of articles that appeared in various Polish journals and the only collective monograph *Światy Olgi Tokarczuk: studia i szkice* (Worlds of Olga Tokarczuk: Studies and Drafts, 2013), which had been the main source of knowledge about the Nobel Prize winner's prose for years, Katarzyna Kantner's book *Jak działać za pomocą słów? Proza Olgi Tokarczuk jako dyskurs krytyczny* (How to Act with Words? Olga Tokarczuk's Prose as Critical Discourse, 2019) has been so far an only comprehensive, authorial approach to Tokarczuk's writing. This approach was known, however, only in Poland. Consequently, the newest proposal by editors Lidia Wiśniewska and Jakub Lipski—*Olga Tokarczuk. Comparative Perspectives*—published by Routledge in 2023, shines significantly against this discursive backdrop as the first wide-ranging attempt to illuminate works of the Polish writer in a broad international scope.

Nevertheless, this hardly means that the bibliography on Tokarczuk abroad, however dispersed, has so far been scant or begun just after the Nobel Prize in 2019. Her book *House of Day, House of Night*, published twice in English, earned the author a nomination for the International Dublin Literary Award in 2004. *Primeval and Other Times* (2010) was also translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones,

therefore increasing interest in Polish writer of Western academia. This focus was however initially bound by the notion of magical realism (cf. Wampuszyc 2014)—the kind of writing label, from which Tokarczuk would rather distance herself (Tokarczuk 2020: 136). As an author with literary panache, transcending established patterns, she became known through *Flights*, published in English in 2017 and translated by Jennifer Croft, for which she received the Man Booker International Prize (2018), making history as the first Polish writer honored with that award. Only a year later she got the Nobel Prize, which caused the discourse around her to expand rapidly: much-awaited next translations of Tokarczuk's works, especially *The Books of Jacob* (trans. Jennifer Croft, 2022), have been critically acclaimed (cf. Charles 2022); her earlier novels have attracted the new academic interests (e.g. Mortensen 2021), in particular *Flights* were considered as an important contribution to metaphysical and philosophical discussions (Bendrat 2020; La Torre Lagares 2020). Since her famous Nobel lecture, the number of articles tapping, explaining and developing the concept of “tenderness” in literature has increased (Jarzynska 2023; Michna 2023; Muskat-Tabakowska 2020; Werner 2023) and Tokarczuk herself, accentuating leftist views, has gained prominence in social and political debate, facing criticism from the nationalizing zeal in the right-wing politics in Poland (on this subject, cf. Kolodziejczyk 2022).

The multi-perspective approaches to Tokarczuk's prose, ranging from psychoanalysis, language and narrative analysis, feminism, historicism, and the sociology of literature, which characterize, for example, the issue of *The Polish Review* (vol. 66, no. 2, 2021) entirely dedicated to the Nobel laureate and edited by Joanna Trzeciak Huss, demonstrates that the need to integrate Tokarczuk's discourse lies in a lack of a concrete methodological approach to her writing. The book *Olga Tokarczuk. Comparative Perspectives* marks a specific interpretive path already in the title; comparative literature becomes a way to unite Tokarczuk's diverse writing and divisive interpretations of her works but not to overshadow the individual authorial concepts that underlie, after all, every anthology. Therefore, presented book corresponds to some extent with Tokarczuk's call in her famous Nobel speech, for writing with attention to “multi-dimensionally” yet “in a way that activates a sense of the whole” (Tokarczuk 2019: 22).

1. Mapping comparative perspective

One might, however, conclude that the need to seek “wholeness” is abandoned by the editor, Lidia Wiśniewska, already in the first sentences of the introduction, when she writes:

This book does not claim to be a comprehensive presentation of Olga Tokarczuk's oeuvre from a comparative perspective, though it can signal some avenues worth pursuing, and thus place Tokarczuk's writing in a broader context. (Wiśniewska, Lipski 2023: 1)

And yet, the impression of wholeness or unity, both in Tokarczuk's understanding and realized in the anthology, refers to a sense of connectivity between the various perspectives: the ones that author adopts in her fiction and the ones that are constituted by different researchers. What unites the diverse outlooks, in both cases, is the methodology. For Tokarczuk's artistic work, methodology of writing also could be seen as an epistemological tool, a way to perceive the world and a certain philosophy of existence and art. In the case of a literary study, there is always a need for a methodology rooted in a tradition of literary theory, definite but at the same time not so hermetic that it limits the possibilities of interpretation. When both of these principles are upheld—and the book *Olga Tokarczuk. Comparative Perspectives* seems to do just that—it may turn out that not only does methodology help to understand fiction, but that fiction contributes to methodological concepts, in this case, to comparative literature. It seems that this kind of interaction lies in the premise of the editors of the latest anthology, and this should be considered as its greatest value.

Wiśniewska notes in the first paragraph of the book that the presented method is to be used with focus on aspects hitherto marginalized in different comparative undertakings (Wiśniewska, Lipski 2023: 1). While she does not explicitly clarify what these “other discussions” are, the summary of the articles outlined by her in the introduction function as a guidepost for the reader, informing him/her that the analyses constituting the anthology treat comparative literature in a broader sense than it was stated, for example, at one time, by the French school.¹ Wiśniewska reveals the foundations of her theoretical thinking through the definition of the American comparatist Henry H.H. Remak, to

1 I am referring to the school represented by scholars such as Paul van Tieghem, Marius-François Guyard, Jean-Marie Carré, which would be doctrine and limit the scope of literary studies **only to literature**, not to other areas of art. Henry H.H. Remak explains the differences between the French and American schools in his article *Comparative Literature. Its Definition and Function* which constitutes the definitional basis for the editors of the anthology. Remak recapitulates, not without irony, the French school with the words: “The student and teacher [in France] of literature who venture beyond national frontiers already assume extra burden. The French seem to fear that taking on, in addition, the systematic study of the relationship between literature and any other area of human endeavor invites the accusation of charlatanism and would,

whom she alludes to in the introduction (Wiśniewska, Lipski: 5), but who also underlies theory of her other book *Między bogiem a naturą. Komparatystyka jako filozofia kultury* (Between God and Nature. Comparative Literature as a Philosophy of Culture) (cf. Wiśniewska 2009: 12–14). Remak defines comparative literature as:

the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country and the study of relationship between literature on the one hand and other areas of knowledge and belief, such as the arts..., philosophy, history, the social sciences..., the sciences, religion, etc., on the other. (Remak 1961: 3)

It seems that Wiśniewska and Lipski want to cross the boundaries of the most evident comparisons confined only to literary texts. Therefore, the second section of the anthology presents the connections between literature and visual art, myths, with an important emphasis on philosophical foundations. However, the twist in the methodological orientation, which is definitely marked by the central article of Magdalena Rabizo-Birek, is appropriately built up in the first part of the anthology, which represents more typical comparative approach. The starting points are set by articles of Rafał Pokrywka and Michał Moch, which juxtapose Tokarczuk's writing with her contemporaries in other literatures: with German author Daniel Kehlman and Serbian—Milorad Pavić's, respectively. However, the authors of the analyses do not double their interpretive method. Pokrywka uses Pierre Bourdieu's sociologies of literature and shows how Tokarczuk's and Kehlman's positions in the literary field have similarly evolved: from beginnings with their disappointing debuts that "did not meet the expectations of the field" to strongly set individual positions that enabled them to inspire further literary conjuncture and, by defining themselves beyond the divisions of low and high, mainstream and avant-garde, even "change the literary field itself" (Wiśniewska, Lipski: 25–26). Moch, on the other hand, focuses on comparing two specific works: Tokarczuk's *The Books of Jacob* and Pavić's *Dictionary of the Khazars* as books that similarly adopt the conventions of the lexicon and combine religious-historical fact with fiction, negotiating a place for minorities in dominant cultures.

In the third article of the anthology, Marek Stanisław's *Integrating Narratives: The Art of Storytelling According to Isaac Bashevis Singer and Olga Tokarczuk*,

at any rate, be detrimental to the acceptance of comparative literature as a respectable and respected academic domain" (cf. Remak 1961: 7).

the reader still follows the same methodological orientation, for Tokarczuk is compared to another writer and Nobel laureate, Isaac Bashevis Singer. And that's where the similarities end, for here a comparative reading illuminates the Nobel laureate's prose differently from the previous two cases. Not only because the reference to Singer draws a connection within a single nation (Singer is, after all, a Polish author writing in Yiddish) and different times (Singer is, after all, a modernist writer), which would, according to some scholars, place the analysis within the studies on influence or national literature rather than comparative literature (cf. Remak 1961: 10–11), but because comparative reading is for Stanisiz a method that steps outside the fictional boundaries and takes into account the authors' shared experience. Stanisiz focuses not on literature, but on metaliterary texts, on the way in which Tokarczuk and Singer theorize their writing. Their authorial method is, according to Stanisiz, based on

the fundamental experience of lack, loss, and absence. In the case of these writers, this experience is not only one of the most important psychological sources of creativity, but also determines their thinking about literature and their specific artistic decisions. (Wiśniewska, Lipski: 51)

By hinting not only to the literary connections, but also to the psychological and biographical aspects, one outlines a certain community of authors' creative thinking and indicates that comparative literature does not have to discard the personal context. This approach is interestingly developed in the following article, which functions as a landmark for readers of the anthology. Magdalena Rabizo-Birek—an expert on the prose of Olga Tokarczuk, the editor of the previously mentioned anthology *Światy Olgi Tokarczuk*—in her text *Found Souls: Olga Tokarczuk Meets Joanna Concejo* points to the unusual use of comparative perspective as a method of signifying the collaboration of the two authors within a single work of art. The article is devoted to the picturebook *Zgubiona dusza (The Lost Soul)* and highlights how two spheres: text and image, but also two sensibilities and biographies of the authors, Olga Tokarczuk and Joanna Concejo, intermingle and inspire each other. It appears that in the center of the comparative analysis lies the personal relationship between the authors, outlined on a biographical level, reaching back to the distant threads of their childhood, which become an origin of the bizarre in their mutual artistic expression. “A sense of lack”—which was brought out by Stanisiz as a basis for literary activity of Tokarczuk and Singer—here takes on the dimension of the uncanny, the spiritual, the enigmatic impression that can actually be “sensed.” Rabizo-Birek shows that this is not a characteristic typical

only to Tokarczuk's writing but also to Concejo's art, in which she manages "to present a ghostly trace of someone's presence, a feeling of abandonment and the lack of something or someone" (Wiśniewska, Lipski 2023: 72).

It is worth mentioning that bizarreness in Stanisław and Rabizo-Birek's viewpoints could also refer to the Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's category of latency,² especially since it also stands for the mood grounded in the post-World War II period. It is not however apparent in the presented texts. Nonetheless, what is evident, is that the anthology tries to place the heterogeneous oeuvre of Tokarczuk within the framework of comparative literature supported by the latest methods of literary studies (sociology of literature, new phenomenology, autobiographical and affective studies). Sometimes these threads are only mentioned or hinted, sometimes indicated directly—as in the case of Rabizo-Birek, who, by placing the focus on the picturebook, contributes to the discussion on the importance of the iconic turn in contemporary humanities (Wiśniewska, Lipski 2023: 72–75).

Expanding the traditional scope of comparative literature provides an interesting take on Tokarczuk's method of writing and could also respond, in a way, to the initial negative critique in Poland, that still casts a shadow over the reception of her works. It is worth mentioning that in the 1990s, Tokarczuk was strongly criticized for creating the literature for masses: Krzysztof Uniłowski, calling her writing a manifestation of "proza śródka" ("middlebrow prose"), accused the author of aesthetic conformism and using the reservoir of modernist poetics in a facile way, just so that the reader of the post-socialist bourgeoisie could be assured, with the little intellectual effort, that he/she was reading and understanding high literature (cf. Uniłowski 2005: 180–190). These threads are reflected in some of the later analyses, not only Polish but also English-language ones, such as the article included in the recently published anthology *Polish Literature as World Literature* (2023), written by Marta Koronkiewicz and Paweł Kaczmarski. The authors write:

Tokarczuk's idea of an *accessible* modernism, of reconciling the modernist legacy with the imperative of instant readerly gratification—as described by Uniłowski in his account of *proza śródka*—lays the foundation for a general aura of secrecy, mysteriousness, and

2 *Latency* for Gumbrecht is the hidden, unacknowledged and unspoken trauma (especially for postwar generation) but understood as a form of "environment, a general mood," not "repression," whose presence is undeniable and can always be felt. Cf. Gumbrecht 2013: 23.

metaphysical enigma that has over time become the signature mood of Tokarczuk's work. This aura, when projected back onto the author's own culture and language, results in something that may only be described as a mysticism of Polishness. (Koronkiewicz, Kaczmarski 2023: 186)

Koronkiewicz and Kaczmarski see the notorious "aura" of Tokarczuk's work in an attempt to create a form of depiction for Polish national identity. It is slightly disappointing that *Olga Tokarczuk. Comparative Perspectives* does not directly refer to the famous charges of Uniłowski like is done by Koronkiewicz and Kaczmarski or, earlier mentioned, Kantner (cf. Kantner 2019: 9–12),³ but it does not mean that the anthology avoids outlining a perspective on that issue. It seems that the complementary pattern of the aforementioned articles provides a way to understand mysticism, the presence of things mysterious and extraordinary in Tokarczuk's work, not only intertwined with Polishness. This is an expression of an autobiographical gesture which underlines her writing method. This links Tokarczuk with other artists across different spheres of literature, art and time and outlines the space of similarities afforded by a comparativist perspective that saves the author from accusations of artificial aestheticization. The anthology paradoxically lifts Tokarczuk from her peculiar pedestal to the benefit of her prose and shows her as a writer genuinely sensitive to subtle shades of experience, as well as marginalized forms: not only short stories and essays, which are often treated more purely than poetry or the novel, but also, as analyzed by Rabizo-Birek, the picturebook—which, both as a form of literature for children and as a graphic-textual form is treated on the margins of literature and taken out of the focus of the critical eye of many scholars.

2. Between transgression and tenderness

"Seeing, after all, means knowing"—Ewa Górecka invokes this phrase from the *Flights* in the conclusion of her article *Heterotopia in the Prose of Olga Tokarczuk* and continues to keep the reader behind the eye of camera as delineated by Rabizo-Birek and pointed at the significance of the visual aspect of literature (Wiśniewska, Lipski 2021: 106). The observation becomes both a cognitive and a creative tool which Tokarczuk uses for depiction of the *Wunderkammer*. In Górecka's comparative perspective cabinets of literary texts correspond with

3 Although it is important to remember that in the first article by Pokrywka, he refers to Tokarczuk's difficult beginnings, but mostly connects it with her choice for specific genre, focusing on her changing position in the Polish literary field (Wiśniewska, Lipski 2023: 17–20).

the *cabinets de curiosités* immortalized in Danish and Flemish art. This is the moment when aesthetics conflates with epistemology: cabinets of curiosities recognized in pre-Enlightenment art, seized by Tokarczuk, become a representation of post-Enlightenment knowledge of the world: with its temporal nonlinearity and the coincidence of events expressed in the juxtaposition of many objects that each can represent “the presence of multiple spaces within a single *spatium*” (Wiśniewska, Lipski 2023: 106).

The human body, stretched between the realms of aesthetics and science, is another medium of an epistemological cognition. Its components, again, are at the same time singular but inseparable—united body parts function as a whole, an organism. But the reader has been already familiar with this aporetic quality of reflection and representation. The “mechanical cosmos of organs” (Wiśniewska, Lipski 2023: 103) becomes the focus of description in Tokarczuk’s *Flights* and is a readjustment of a constellation writing method. And here the reader (of both Tokarczuk’s work and the anthology) reaches a point in which he or she is at risk of getting lost in a vicious circle of meanings, ectypal images and cognitive tautology. Górecka, following Tokarczuk, tries to find a guidance in Michel Foucault’s heterotopias—the actual places (in contrast to utopias) that are in some way inconvenient and inconsistent. This interpretative method brings us safely from the hazy philosophical heights down to earth, onto the material space, which another dimension, although unusual and strange, is always grounded in the tangible cultural, social and institutional contexts. Thus, the article contributes to the concept of “bizarreness” in Tokarczuk’s writing: what underlies the bizarre is not only the personal, as the previous text have shown us, but also the public—especially when the former cabinets of curiosities “still exist as such or within the institutions into which they have been transformed” (Wiśniewska, Lipski 2023: 97). The comparative link between the novel and the art shows how, through a subversive dialogue, Tokarczuk exposes the ways in which knowledge is produced and distributed.

It is the transformations of the narrations about the world that are the main topic of the closing article in the anthology. In her text Lidia Wiśniewska presents the way, in which Tokarczuk incorporates culturally rooted myths in order to complement them with a new perspective. Tokarczuk does not so much “re-write” the story of the goddess Inana, as she skips certain parts of it in her book *Anna In w grobowcach świata* (*Anna In in the Tombs of the World*). That’s how she accentuates the feminist aspect and re-establishes “Inana’s journey into her sister’s world as an autonomous fact” (Wiśniewska, Lipski 2023: 113). The method of the creative dialogue with an intertextual reference is constituted on the one hand by omitting (un-writing) the part of the narrative, and on the

other hand by writing additional threads. At the beginning of the anthology Michał Moch referred to the latter as “the method of conjecture,” that is, the literary method of filling in places absent from historical documents, such as depictions of a daily life or the perspective of women’s experience (Wiśniewska, Lipski 2023: 37). One might connect it with Roman Ingarden’s phenomenology and its “places of indeterminacy” that needs to be filled by reader in the process of concretization. For Tokarczuk, however, the subversive transposition of the narrative is combined with a strategy of creation rather than reception.

Once the reader of the anthology reaches the end of the volume, it becomes evident to him/her that the attempt of the book is to grasp Tokarczuk *modus scribendi*. Different comparative outlooks of her methods of writing create the inner orientation bridging all the articles together. And yet, if one were to define what this method exactly is, one would gaze rather confused into a starred sky full of distinct perspectives but unfortunately without a clear and operative conclusion. It seems that this effect is driven by the Tokarczuk’s ability to expand metapoetic terminology: she refers to a conjuncture, constellation, ex-centric position of the author, transgression, and finally—the tender narrator. This is how she defines the latter:

[tender narrator] is a point of view, a perspective from where everything can be seen. Seeing everything means recognizing the ultimate fact that all things that exist are mutually connected into a single whole, even if the connections between them are not yet known to us. Seeing everything also means a completely different kind of responsibility for the world, because it becomes obvious that every gesture “here” is connected to a gesture “there,” that a decision taken in one part of the world will have an effect in another part of it, and that differentiating between “mine” and “yours” starts to be debatable. (Tokarczuk 2019: 21)

In accordance with this definition, Górecka outlined the vision of a collector in her article. A collector is someone who does not create heterotopias, but resides in and out them, who juxtaposes objects but does not judge them, who does not conquer their space but rather kindly let them express themselves. Tenderness thus becomes another epistemic category, along with the ability to observe and the medium of the body. But the question arises: aren’t there too many of mutually intertwined methods of cognition? Even more so as the anthology presents additional concepts, such as for example “transgressive realism” (p. 4), cognitive “algorithms” (p. 145), anatomical imaginary connected with the *cabinet de curiosites* (pp. 95–11). All of the aforementioned approaches

attempt to capture Tokarczuk's writing method in a similarly universal way, by connecting it with the cognitive need to understand the principles of the world. They combine different perspectives into a whole, reflecting worlds that are often antinomic to each other—but contiguous, like two sides of a coin. It is of course an appropriate strategy but as long as the reader is far from going round in the interpretative circles.

All the more strongly stand out proposals that focus on subjectivity, authorship and experience; after all, it is “Olga Tokarczuk” herself that constitutes the first part of the book's title. A perspective focused on a personal involvement in collaborating on a single work of art—as shown in Rabizo-Birek's article, and a perspective that reveals a method that reaches back to a community of personal experience—as shown in Stanis's article, sheds a very interesting light on the author and her oeuvre. And it complements the concept of the tender narrator, taking him out of the embrace of abstraction towards (suggested, after all, in the name itself)—the affect. This reflection is hinted at the beginning of the anthology, when Pokrywka emphasizes that in the tender narrator the most important thing is “the art of compassion and sharing feelings” (Wiśniewska, Lipski 2023: 24). It seems that the tender narrator is a subjectivity rather than just a literary instance. It engages in dialogue with different narratives and treats these relations with an understanding rather than irony. It is a kind of ambivalent ontology of the subject, which stands between the literary abstraction and the author that have his/her own experiences and established social role. Ryszard Nycz calls such an ambivalent ontology “a sylleptic subject” (“podmiot sylleptyczny”) (Nycz 1994: 8–9), while Kantner spoke of “paratopias” of identity, in which someone oscillates between “in” and “out” positions (Kantner 2019: 17).

Despite all the concerns, there should be no doubt, that the anthology constitutes so far the first and successful comparative attempt to shed a light on Tokarczuk's writing. Treating comparative literature outside its traditional boundaries is an orientation marked by Wiśniewska at the beginning of the anthology. It is worth noting that Wiśniewska adjusted the same approach in her earlier book *Między bogiem a naturą* (Between God and Nature). It is there where she explains the importance of incorporating interdisciplinarity into the basic premise of comparative literature:

Passing over these lines of as much division as connectivity, it reveals both the differences and the similarities between them, through the similarities bringing out unity, while through the differences bringing out separateness, and consequently the fluctuating semi-existence of both. In this sense, interdisciplinarity situates itself—on the principle of

mirror complementarity—“on the other side”..., but not “outside” the comparison of literatures with each other. (Wiśniewska 2009: 13–14)

It can be concluded that the methodological concept establishing comparative literature as a transgressive approach is essentially authorial. Undoubtedly, however, in the anthology the theory does not outbalance the literature. On the contrary, Tokarczuk's prose and herself as an author undertaking metareflection turn out to complement the assumed methodology. As we read in the definition above, in the assumption of comparative literature lies the idea of wholeness but achieved by separate outlooks and this concept overlaps with the definition of the tender narrator. With this configuration, Tokarczuk's prose illuminates the theory with categories that go beyond the text or context, but are also related to the body, experience and affect. Perhaps even tenderness.

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| **Abstract**

The article is a review of the recently published by Routledge anthology *Olga Tokarczuk. Comparative Perspectives*, edited by Lidia Wiśniewska and Jakub Lipski. As the first monograph on Tokarczuk written in English, supported by a concrete methodological proposal, it finds a significant place in the international discourse of the author. In the Polish literary discourse, which has been divided, it also opens new interpretative paths. The authors of the anthology, passing the boundaries of traditional comparative literature, highlight the epistemological aspect of Tokarczuk's work, the way of understanding the "bizarness," as well as the sources of her aesthetics. It turns out that the social dimension of Tokarczuk's prose, also gains a personal character, and the tender narrator, moving along the comparative path, has a chance to break out of abstraction towards subjectivity.

Keywords: Olga Tokarczuk, comparative literature, tender narrator

| **Bio**

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