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Olga Tokarczuk's Nomadism

Olga Tokarczuk's literature has been the subject of many excellent interpretations and vivisections – both concerning the “mood” of her prose, as well as critical analyses of particular novels, short stories, essays or occasional statements which she often shares [Kantner; Fliszewska; Zawisza; Cisowska; Larenta]. A principal trope employed by most of her critics is an emphasis on examining certain motifs, categories or universal, obsessively reoccurring topics; the characteristic *timbre* of this deliberate prose which is always mysterious and perplexing – but, at the same time, affects readers by exposing them to what is also part of their experience, even as it remains in the unconscious. Let us list a few of these tropes: a journey, a labyrinth, space, time, myth, fairy tale, a longing for a world which makes sense, the human body as microcosm, the desire for immortality, the relations between human and nonhuman subjects, a map and a territory... Beginning with her debut novel *Podróż ludzi Księgi* (*The Journey of the Book-People*, 1993) and culminating with the monumental *Księgi Jakubowe*

(*The Books of Jacob*, 2014) and *Opowiadania bizardne* (*Bizarre Stories*, 2018), not only do we find all of these tropes present in Tokarczuk's writing – they are indeed written into the diegetic world of her imagination – but they also form a specific manifesto of an intentionally constructed, critical discourse about reality that “dresses as” and “hides behind” a literary creation, only to return as a diagnosis of the anthropological condition of humanity.

Bieguni (*Flights*, 2007) remains perhaps the best example of this style of writing. The existential situation of a person embarking upon a never ending journey, either voluntary or forced, becomes an excuse for forming the aforementioned diagnosis, and something even more: a story about the contemporary nomadic lifestyle, the obsession with movement and the inability to stop. Why is movement an obligation? It seems that Olga Tokarczuk does not share Milan Kundera's optimism when he wrote, many years ago, that “a road is a tribute to space”, and “every stretch of road has meaning in itself and invites us to stop.” [223] Today the sole act of moving becomes endowed with its own meaning, as we are constantly being reminded that humans are merely living in the ruins of past sense and among past meanings of specific places. The world is a transit point in which we can only be reminded of the old anthropological truths, or, more precisely, recalled again, after being forgotten. Let us focus on this trope.

Olga Tokarczuk seems to share the rather common opinion among intellectuals that the modern person, regardless of his or her financial situation or class stratification, is unable to settle anywhere – which is his or her fault as much as it is a curse. What Gaston Bachelard beautifully described as the “intermediary world” becomes a refuge or shelter, the space “where reverie and reality mingle, a plasticity of man and world is realized” [167]; it is the space in which one can reenact the past vision of a world of roots and community; it is there where, using our senses and linguistic creativity, we can obtain the meanings which we unsuccessfully search for in our own homelessness. A story is a recalling of this intermediary world, its fleeting evocation existing only for the duration of reading.

The philosopher and geographer Augustin Berque reminds us that the Greek language has two words for

describing a place. The first is *topos*, used in contemporary academic and literary discourses in different contexts. It refers to an abstract place, a point on a map. The second is *chora*, although its semantics have been long forgotten; it is an existential place, possessing all of the qualities that render it unique. It is *chora* that makes the people living in it different from what they would be in other places. What is more, it is people who influence *chora*, transform or modify it [Berque]. *Chora* remains a mysterious concept – Plato had even called it “dark.” According to its definition, *chora* is a space of mixing and meeting of both that which is unchangeable, and that which is fleeting. If we read this space as a continuum, it becomes not only a condition for the creation of the world, but also a premise for the possibility of obtaining knowledge about ideas and eternal truths in a world in constant flux. It is “the stigma” and “the matrix”, simultaneously “receiving” and “breeding”, which encouraged the ancients to call this circular, never-ending interaction “the poetry of the world.” [Chollet 25]

Olga Tokarczuk seems to miss this ideal of *chora*. She regrets that modern populations are indifferent to the individual character of places, and instead perceive the world solely through the prism of *topos* – that is, they recognize the map as being the territory. The primal dynamic of *chora* has been broken by modernity, with its vision of a disjointed world created from many inert, disconnected elements (things are parts of the identity of being). I feel quite certain that Tokarczuk would agree with Berque’s notion that in such a world, “the poetry of the world has become petrified.” Today’s perception of the world as something that is opposed to humans makes us forget that we are always the product of our surroundings, that we belong to the world.¹ It is not movement but rooting that should be seen as the starting point for the transformation of the world; but this is a truth that has been long forgotten. To bring it back we need imagination, dreams, a myth, and a fairy tale.

Tokarczuk’s first two novels, *The Journey of the Book-People* and *Primeval and Other Times*, reveal the longing for this existential place. The protagonists of the first novel move through different *topoi* during

their journey to the final destination, the location of the hidden Book, although the book’s narrative in fact depicts the revealing of the truth of the myth which is preserved in *chora*. The titular Primeval, on the other hand, represents a classic *chora*. Tokarczuk describes it as follows: “To walk at a brisk pace across Primeval from north to south would take an hour, and the same from east to west. And if someone wanted to go right round Primeval, at a slow pace, taking a careful, considered look at everything, it would take him a whole day, from morning to evening.” [5] Primeval is located in a real geography (in the end, Kielce is somewhere nearby), however, it is at the same time a mythical space in which the circular time of myth imposes itself on the linearity of events and occurrences. In many ways it resembles Salman Rushdie’s imaginary homelands, the territory of stability and transfer, of *primeval* continuance and outer forces which in the end lead to the destruction of this enclave of identity. Primeval almost seems like an “anthropological place”, built with the use of imagination and reality “twisted into words”, the last enclave where an attentive observer can witness the “poetry of the world.” Primeval is both a myth and a dream, a place that is inhabited, a world that does not reject us, but instead brings everything together. It is, however, destined for destruction, as is any rooting in a world of widespread transfer of words, ideas, people, and commodities, or people-as-commodities.

The entirety of Tokarczuk’s writing in the 21st century focuses not on *chora*, but on the journey in search of it, although it also expresses complete doubt that modern *topoi* can in any way resonate in a similar way. Her literature speaks about hopelessness, obsessively focusing on movement, which is most visible in *Flights*, and even more pronounced in *Bizarre Stories*. The latter can be perceived as a metaphor of this travel prose. The French word *bizarre* describes something strange, abnormal, eccentric, eerie, but also – funny. The ten stories that make up this collection deal with “strangeness” without relying on historical or geographical limitations; it is a journey through different *topoi* taken both from the past and from the present. It is a prose that expresses a feeling of hopelessness towards the world which constantly eludes us, and can only be “pinned down” through a residual phenomenological vivisection – one that is never completed.

¹ As Mona Chollet writes: “In old French a dying person was referred to as someone ‘returning the keys’. When we die today, do we have anything to return?.” [22]

It should not be surprising to us, given that *bizarre* is in a state of constant proliferation of new and different meanings; the term is used by tourist agencies (also those offering “pleasures for the loins”) and is a hip-hop artist’s name etc. Even *bizarre* has become a common, over-used term, yet another commodity.

Sadly, the same seems to have happened with Tokarczuk’s prose. It is more and more a type of travel literature, weaving narratives which express a fascination with the mobility of the world, of people and objects. Even the monumental *The Books of Jacob* are obsessed with the idea of nomadism, although in part the writer returns to some of her earlier motifs, especially the longing for *chora*. The disjointed, chaotic narrative – which ultimately does not align itself in a linear sequence, as it did in *Primeval and Other Times* – is polyphonic, representing different literary genres. It does not create a loose, elusive whole as is the case with *Flights*. Instead, *The Books of Jacob* is based on a thick and complex network of connections between different threads, which makes it easy for the reader to get lost in the rich tapestry of meanings. The historical figure of Jacob Frank remains the axis of the story – a narrative mirroring historical anthropology, as it were – that tells us about a strange form of life. It is again a story about a world long forgotten, about a concrete group of Book-People. For them it is a substitute of *chora*, a *sacrum* that is impossible even to imagine. The entire world was something sacred according to the religious movement created by Frank. The writer’s message is clear: an escape to the past gives a change to come closer to a form of life that we have successfully wiped out. It is a space for Bachelard’s intermediary world.

Let me digress for a moment. In his famous book *The Cry for Myth* the American psychologist Rollo May wrote about the dangers that result from our inability to access the mythical imagination. He writes: “Our myths no longer serve their function of making sense of existence, the citizens of our day are left without direction or purpose in life, and people are at a loss to control their anxiety and excessive feeling of guilt. [...] This ‘lonely search for internal identity’ is a widespread need which gives rise in our society to the development of psychoanalysis and the many forms and promises of psychotherapy and the multitude of cure-alls and cults, constructive or destructive

as they may be.” [16] Tokarczuk, herself a trained psychologist, believes in one cure – the nomadic journey during which one can share kaleidoscopic observations and report on “the misery of the world.” These observations are based on knowledge from the fields of anthropology, sociology, and psychology, on well-known concepts that have been widely discussed in many interpretative works dedicated to Tokarczuk’s prose.

In *Flights* Tokarczuk explicitly states that: “Each of my pilgrimages aims at some other pilgrim.” [*Flights* 25] Nomadism becomes a way of life and a framing device for anthropological observations, which are the collision of myth and reality – and, according to the writer, also the best way of seeing the transformation of today’s world. However, as far as Tokarczuk’s journeys are a “first-hand” experience, her diagnoses feed on the words of others, and ultimately end up sounding rather banal and worn-out in their intrusiveness. Nowhere is it as obvious as in the Man Booker Prize-winning *Flights*. As Paweł Sasko wrote in his review, this structurally complicated novel carries a surprisingly simple ideology it is worth quoting a longer passage from his text:

“Everything begins with the old-believers (*bieguni* in Polish). As we can read on the book’s cover, they are ‘a breakaway fraction of Orthodox Old Believers’ who ‘believed that the world is steeped in evil’ and ‘the only way of saving it is through a journey, movement’. It is not especially challenging for the reader to grasp what the author is trying to say – everything is stated explicitly. Remaining motionless, being attached to specific places and situations results in numbness, a consolidation of the old order.” [Sasko]

This is precisely how a world without *chora* looks like. Instead of the identity places of the past, we are left with a bourgeois mentality which becomes the subject of Tokarczuk’s criticism in her most recent books. But rooting is not only a characteristic of bourgeois stability or aversion for change – indeed, it is our greatest need, regardless of the fact that it has turned into a type of social disability, at least according to those who seem to privilege nomadic movement and collecting sensations. Sasko writes: “The impressive complexity of the novel’s form encourages us to look for deeper meanings. The reader searches for it until the last page, only to find more nuanced reflections

on the same worn-out truths. 'If one stops – one petrifies; if one stands for a moment – one becomes pinched like an insect' – the same thought is told to the reader using different words. [...] In the search for meaning, the reader finally encounters what the author establishes as the myth of nomads – a tribe of people who are defined by journey and movement. Their god is Caerus, the Greek personification of luck and opportunity. The journey turns into an expedition into the inside of the human body, with its organs, preserved in formalin, becoming stiff and rigid. Both the anatomic and the nomadic threads are unexpectedly connected by the two great minds of their times: Copernicus and Vesalius. The first scientist was responsible for the mapping of the globe, while the second had created the foundations for modern anatomy and the map of the human body." [Sasko]

Olga Tokarczuk chooses the fate of a nomad – she travels around the world, writing about the macrocosm of the globe and the microcosm of the human body. She is well-read and erudite, but although her nomadism is refined, it leads her to expressing more and more banal and petrified observations, like those relating to time [*Flights* 352]. We can find many anthropological categories that are interwoven with each other [Burszta; Hazan and Hertzog; Braidotti]. But they appear only when the writer decides to stop for a moment in order to share some thoughts from her peregrinations. Her prose becomes lost in the simple act of moving, which has consequences. The rules and characteristics of a neoliberal mode of life have reached every corner of the globe, penetrating every individual intimacy and lifestyle, and furthermore pose a great challenge for those who try to grasp it cognitively. If we are therefore living in a "hotel for nomads" – to use the title of a beautiful book written by Cees Nooteboom, *Nomad's Hotel* – then whether we want it or not, we have all become a type of traveler who is forced to make hasty observations, to write them down and constantly compare it to other everyday affects; the nomad is moving, and so does everything that they take with them on their cognitive journey. What is important, however, is that in a world in which "to be a traveler" has become a popular form of self-identification, as have the acts of collecting and presenting impressions, the nomad that I am thinking of – and which Tokarczuk also thinks of – is someone

who is invisible in public space, as they travel by themselves and according to a logic understood only by them. They do not share their experiences and bizarre discoveries with anyone else. This type of nomadism is not joyful, but on the other hand, often leads to the sad recollection of the discovery of the pain that is brought on by culture.

To be clear, the modern nomad, as I understand this figure, does not have to move from place to place in the physical sense – it is the world around him which is constantly moving. This makes even the most local existence seem like it exists in the eye of a cyclone. I would go so far as to say, following Jonathan Franzen's remarks, that even if we choose to stay at home, technology will still find a way to follow us at every step of the way, offering a plethora of words and images about the world in motion. As Nooteboom writes: "Maybe the genuine traveler is always positioned in the eye of the storm. The storm being the world, the eye that with which he views it. Meteorologists tell us that within this eye all is silent, perhaps as silent as a monk's cell. Whoever learns how to see with this eye might also learn how to distinguish between what is real and what is not, if only by observing the ways in which things and people differ, and the ways in which they are the same." [8] But is Tokarczuk able to do this?

Traveling often results from a longing for difference. It is an escape from identity, but also a testament to the act of remaining in place, of staying in the same place, as though we have never left our home. That is why both traveling and staying "home" are analogous strategies for escaping – some choose movement; others choose the illusory silence of a resting nomad. This is how I perceive the paradox of Tokarczuk's writing. It feeds on the illusion that movement can liberate us. But how can it be done if we believe that any type of rooting, of being fixed in one place is ultimately responsible for confining, imprisoning or enslaving us? What else remains? For me it seems that it is "the call for myth." A myth that is, however, firmly rooted in the past, a past that is equally historical and imaginative, or a result of the interplay of imagination and a more and more predictable relying on the anthropological archive.

Naturally, Tokarczuk's literature is much richer in other contexts than those few I have discussed in this

article. It deals with themes and reflections which the author seems to collect on the road, during her travels, or which she smuggles in her narratives while seemingly writing about different subject-matters. As I mentioned at the beginning, all of her stories share a characteristic “mood”, perfectly recognizable regardless of the form or genre of a given novel. Heidegger’s *Die Stimmung* of this prose seems to be the alienation of modern men and women who are always living in some kind of temporary state of meaning. It is a certainty of experiencing atopy, to use another Greek concept. The protagonists of Tokarczuk’s narratives travel by themselves, in the present (since this is how every journey looks), in a world which is less and less sympathetic and friendly, a world in which those engaging in acts of communication indeed no longer listen to one another. What is most disheartening, however, is the fact that even telling stories about the character of this world has to refer to well-worn clichés or repeatable mantras which fail to tell us anything new. Olga Tokarczuk lives a nomadic life, but her perspective on the world is far from being a coherent, anthropological vision of the world. Her literature thus seems to surrender to the mood of the world, but it does not offer any remedy or answer as to how we could try to challenge or even change this state of being.

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ABSTRACT

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Olga Tokarczuk’s Nomadism

This article attempts to interpret the work of Olga Tokarczuk via the lens of nomadism, which is one of the defining features of contemporary times. Tokarczuk’s prose is an example of a distinctive transition from the chora to the topos in the sense of an inability to anchor the modern subject in any form of lasting roots. The nomadic stories of Tokarczuk are both a diagnosis of human homelessness as well an expression of helplessness; what can be done with this fluid, unmoored human condition and where to find any form of lasting identification with another person and a fixed place?

Keywords: nomadism, chora, topos, myth, medial world, roots