

THE WORKS OF OLGA TOKARCZUK:  
POSTMODERN AESTHETICS, MYTHS, ARCHETYPES,  
AND THE FEMININE TOUCH

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I would like to tell you a story of my visit to a local library. I had seen many of Olga Tokarczuk's books in the catalogue but I could not find any of them on the shelves. When I asked if I had looked in the right place, I learned from a librarian that it is difficult to borrow Tokarczuk's works because they simply disappear almost immediately they are returned. A similar point is made by the author of the article "Time of Olga" ("Czas Olgi"), Kinga Dunin who, looking at the shelves in her rooms, discovers that all the works by Tokarczuk are missing. She asked herself: "Why do people I know borrow only these books but not other ones written by different Polish writers. I have so many books!?" (Dunin 1999).

Both situations illustrate that Olga Tokarczuk (b. 1962) is not only one of the most critically acclaimed but also one of the most popular contemporary writers in Poland. Another result of this popularity is the fact that Tokarczuk is present not only in academic journals but also in women's magazines. These examples prove that in her writing, she manages to join aspects which seem poles apart. Unlike in the West, in Poland it is not considered beneficial or prestigious for a writer to appear in the daily press. Tokarczuk has nothing against this situation, especially because in her opinion not all readers, male or female, read literary journals.

Leslie Fiedler argues in his well-known article "Cross the Border—Close the Gap" (1969)<sup>1</sup> that postmodern literature is no longer only intellectual and elitist but also

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<sup>1</sup> *Cross the border, close the gap!* was first published in *Playboy* in December 1969 and republished in a separate volume in 1972.

romantic, sentimental and popular at the same time. It started questioning and assessing the notion of the perceived gap between “high art” (or “serious literature”) and “popular art.” He argues that “pop art is, whatever its overt politics, subversive: a threat to all hierarchies insofar as it is hostile to order and ordering in its own realm. What the final intrusion of Pop into the citadels of High Art provides, therefore, for the critic is the exhilarating new possibility of making judgments about the ‘goodness’ and ‘badness’ of art quite separate from distinctions between ‘high’ and ‘low’ with their concealed class bias.”<sup>2</sup>

In other words, it was now up to the literary critics to devise criteria with which they would then be able to assess any new literature along the lines of “good” or “bad” rather than “high” versus “popular.” According to Fiedler, the postmodern writer is like a double agent who feels at home in every world. The title of his article “Cross the Border—Close the Gap” also refers to the border between things which are usual and unusual, between reality and the realm of myth.

Tokarczuk does the same thing. She writes about the things which are extraordinary, but these miracles are rooted in everyday life. According to Fiedler, postmodernism manifests itself as a quintessential pluralism of languages, role models and ways of thinking and acting in the same framework (Fiedler 1969). Tokarczuk herself thinks of her books as “boxes within boxes.” As she expressed it in an interview: “On one level they’re books to read on the train, it’s possible to read them as family sagas, as adventure stories, but a more demanding reader will find something deeper in them” (Tokarczuk, “Pop Dreams”). Her prose is not trivial, nevertheless her narratives are popular among people who generally read only newspapers; it may therefore be seen as an example of this kind pluralism. Thus, it is possible to reconcile the taste of a literary critic and an average reader. As Przemysław Czapliński argues: “Thanks to her [Tokarczuk], we started to feel at home in Polish literature. Perhaps this is because we have met someone who talks to us in such a way that we have the feeling that this

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<sup>2</sup> As explained at [http://www.artandpopularculture.com/Cross\\_the\\_Border\\_%E2%80%94\\_Close\\_the\\_Gap](http://www.artandpopularculture.com/Cross_the_Border_%E2%80%94_Close_the_Gap) (Accessed: 22 July, 2009.)

person was listening to us before” (Czapliński 2004, 12). I propose a short elaboration on how she achieved this position in Polish literature.

In 1989 Tokarczuk published her first book, a collection of poems entitled *Cities in Mirrors* (*Miasta w lustrach*). Her debut novel *The Journey of the Book-People* (*Podróż ludzi książki*) appeared in 1993 and earned her instant popularity with the audience and reviewers. She received a prize from the Polish Society of Book Publishers honouring her as the best new prose writer of 1992 and 1993. By employing the distinctive narrative technique which had originally attracted the critics' attention, Tokarczuk examined metaphysical issues. The follow-up novel *E. E.* (1996) took its title from the initials of its protagonist, a young woman growing up in a bourgeois German-Polish family in the 1920s in Breslau<sup>3</sup> and developing her psychic abilities. The third novel, *Primeval and Other Times* (*Prawiek i inne czasy*) published in 1996, remains her most successful novel to date.<sup>4</sup> It was a mythical fairy-tale account of life in a fictitious village in Eastern Poland that brought her international acclaim. The novel has been awarded with prizes on many occasions.<sup>5</sup> Tokarczuk's books have been translated into twelve languages, including English, French, German, Finnish and Chinese. Arguably, in the eyes of Tokarczuk's fans, her books are no longer objects of academic evaluation but have become integrated into their own experience (Czapliński 2004). This is the reason why I wish to focus on this novel in this article. Thanks to the commercial success of *Primeval and Other Times*, Tokarczuk gained financial independence and was able to establish her own publishing company.

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<sup>3</sup> The German city that was to become the Polish Wrocław after World War II.

<sup>4</sup> An English translation by Antonia Lloyd-Jones is due to appear in December 2009 (Prague: Twisted Spoon Press) and we follow here its title. All translated passages will be quoted from this forthcoming edition. The editors are most grateful to Antonia Lloyd-Jones for providing the passages.

<sup>5</sup> For example: The Kościelski Foundation award (1997); Nike 1997—Reader's Prize; *Polityka* award (1997); In May 1998, the French edition of *Primeval and Other Times* was nominated for the Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger. Tokarczuk was awarded the Nike Literature Prize 2008 for her novel *Runners* (*Bieguni*).

Her work has been interpreted by using different keys. The first is the psychological one—Tokarczuk was trained as a psychologist and before she began her literary career she had begun her practice as a therapist.<sup>6</sup> The second key is the feminist one: critics often emphasize the role of women with complicated biographies in Tokarczuk's texts and thus apply feminist theory when analyzing her female characters. Admittedly, Tokarczuk claims she takes a lot from women's gossip.

But the most important key would seem to be the mythographical tone. Tokarczuk has been particularly noted for the hallmark mythical tone of her writing. Another method has been to relate her writing to postmodern aesthetics. Tokarczuk herself considers her work to be "postmodern" (Tokarczuk, "Pop Dreams"), although at the same time, she thinks that the notion of postmodernism has become too diluted today. In her opinion, today's readers are more demanding and to read a modern book is often considered simply boring by them. "That's why my books are made up of sort of MTV video-short clips" Tokarczuk says. "You can start reading anywhere, in any order. I think this is a feature of postmodernism, this video-clip narrative" (Tokarczuk, "Pop Dreams"). Thus, Tokarczuk's narratives bridge experience of real life and the imaginary, dreams and the present as well as the past and the present. Moreover, Tokarczuk often refers to the writers born in the 1960s as a *generation without history*: "we appeared when everything important for the country and its people had already happened and all the choices had been made" (Tokarczuk 1995, 60). The writers found themselves slightly "out of the grips of History" (Tokarczuk 1995, 60). It should be noted that the writers who found themselves there did so because of their own choice. The new Polish prose is hugely absorbed in its anti-collective spirit. It wants to stay in the realms of literature, art and culture, and willingly abandons political struggles or even ground-breaking shifts in political ideas. Discarding political and ethical engagement, Polish prose found its own local way to meta-consciousness, a generation without history. The eruption of newness in prose (stylistic, formal and conceptual) in

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<sup>6</sup> She completed Psychology Studies at the University of Warsaw in 1985. During this time she worked in a therapy centre for maladjusted children and in a psychiatric clinic in Drewnica.

this first period of the crisis of modernity was dazzling: “Just about every prose writer’s debut offered a different language, a different use of narrative, and a different manner of presenting the world. The climax of innovation came in 1995” (Czapliński 1995).<sup>7</sup>

Jean-François Lyotard analyzes the epistemology of postmodern culture as the end of “grand narratives” or metanarratives, which he considers a quintessential feature of modernity (Lyotard 1979). Among the metanarratives are reductionism and teleological notions of human history such as those of the theories of Enlightenment and Marxism. He defines the postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives. The result of this incredulity is a plurality of language-games (a term coined by Wittgenstein), without any overarching structure. Lyotard professes a preference for this plurality of small narratives that compete with each other, replacing the totalitarianism of grand narratives. The change in Polish prose can also be seen as the eruption of small narratives.

Despite this change of direction in auto-referencing and a wide range of small narratives, Polish contemporary literary critics and writers remain sceptical towards the term “postmodernism.” Many authors born after 1960 listed in a literary dictionary, as well as Dick Hebdige, refer to postmodernism as a *buzzword* (Dunin-Wąsowicz 1995, 68; Hebdige 1988, 181-182). Marcin Świetlicki, a poet, regards the term postmodernism as “such an awful and unclear term that using it seems a *faux-pas*” (Świetlicki 1995, 60). Yet, postmodernism has been the most commonly used term to describe young prose, and it is often abused. It sounds good in the title of a review. That is why even Tokarczuk herself, when asked how she felt about being shoved into a postmodernist category, replied: “I don’t feel like anything as this word doesn’t mean anything any more and such a simplified categorization doesn’t make any sense” (Tokarczuk 1995, 60). In another interview she said: “It’s possible to say that [...] all written works today

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<sup>7</sup> Czapliński drew attention to the publication of books as diverse as Magdalena Tulli’s *Dreams and Stones* (*Sny i kamienie*), Andrzej Stasiuk’s *White Raven* (*Biały kruk*), Stefan Chwin’s *Hanemann*, Natasza Goerke’s *Fractals* (*Fraktale*), Olga Tokarczuk’s *E.E.*, Jacek Baczak’s *Notes from the Night Shift* (*Zapiski z nocnych dyżurów*), Izabela Filipiak’s *Total Amnesia* (*Absolutna amnezja*) and Jerzy Pilch’s *Other Delights* (*Inne rozkosze*).

are part of postmodern literature. But I believe that writers, especially the younger ones in Poland, are trying to overcome this paradigm” (Tokarczuk 2003). Despite the fact that both critics and writers are sceptical about the possibility of being able to define what postmodernism is, we can find the consciousness of its own ontology in the new Polish prose. According to Raymond Federman, this self-consciousness illustrates that the first function of this prose will be the manifestation of its own fictitiousness as elaborated in *Surfiction* (Federman 1975).

Supporting the thesis about the meta-textual approach found in prose in recent years, Bogumiła Kaniewska states that this inclination manifests itself in two ways using two different genres of the novel: the *meta-novel* and the *story-novel* (Kaniewska 1998). The first type has its roots in the experiences of the avant-garde (Anglo-Saxon modernism). Its structure is hybrid, anti-thematic. What links certain (often unrelated) paragraphs in the text is not the content but the narrative. When this occurs, the meta-textual reflection exists on the surface and it is impossible to interpret the novel without paying attention to this layer. In contrast, a different thing happens as far as the story-novel is concerned, which is based on the content and is rooted in more classical and epic principles. Here meta-reflection is completely hidden or appears in a discreet way, stifled by the unfolding plot. In this case, it is possible that the reader will fail to notice the “meta” layer, or might simply overlook it and interpret the novel on its plot level, which is what usually happens in the case of Umberto Eco’s novels.<sup>8</sup>

How can we apply this typology to Tokarczuk’s prose? *The Journey of the Book-People* and *E. E.* may serve as examples of the *story-novel*. The first is a parable set in seventeenth-century France about two lovers' quest for a mysterious Book. The

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<sup>8</sup> It is worth pointing out that a similar yet not identical duality in postmodern prose is described by David Lodge. Describing the contemporary English prose, he divides it into two linguistic poles that were differentiated by Roman Jakobson: Metaphoric, associated with the tradition of modernism and symbolism, and the other—metonymic, which is anti-modern and realistic. Lodge comments: “If Jakobson is right, that all discourse tends toward either the metaphoric or the metonymic pole of language, it should be possible to categorize postmodernist writing under one heading or the other. [...] It would, I believe, be very possible to categorize postmodernist writing in these terms, but perhaps not very profitable. For if we extend the term “postmodernist” to cover all writers to whom it seems applicable, we might identify them individually as either metaphoric or metonymic.” See Lodge 1977, 228.

structure is based on both a fascinating travel story full of adventures and the metaphorical parable of a human life. The author is quite critical of her starting point: "It is written by someone who's fascinated by literature and tries to write in a literary style, not to create anything of her own. On the other hand, this is a universal story about a mythical quest for some kind of order in the world, in search of a meaning." (Tokarczuk, "Pop Dreams"). In *E. E. Tokarczuk* exploits again a pattern easy to identify—the initiation novel.

Since 1997 Tokarczuk's work has begun to drift away from the story-novel genre towards shorter prose texts and heterogeneous forms. *Playing on Many Drums* (*Gra na wielu bębenkach*, 2001) is a collection of novella-type stories which combines literary fiction and reality. The book includes nineteen stories arranged in three groups. The first group could be described as self-referential because they discuss the nature of creativity (not just literary). The second group consists of apocryphal stories based on authentic stories and local legends Tokarczuk discovered in the Silesian provinces. The writer develops and continues these stories in her own way, adding colour to bare historical facts. Finally, the third group includes a number of stories with realistic main themes of a moral/psychological kind. Her next book, *House of Day, House of Night* (*Dom dzienny, dom nocny*, 1998, trans. 2002) reflects the structure of the meta-novel. It is rather a patchwork of loosely connected disparate stories, hagiography, incidental observations, private diary entries, and essays about life. The same form is retained in her most recent book *The Runners* (*Bieguni*, 2007).

Aleksander Fiut observes that one of the main features of Polish postmodernism is an "escape from history," accompanied by a "retreat from the fatherland" (Fiut 1996, 186). While Fiut correctly argues this point with regard to Olga Tokarczuk's first two novels, it is definitely inapplicable to the novels *Primeval and Other Times* (*Prawiek i inne czasy*, 1996) and *House of Day, House of Night* (*Dom dzienny, dom nocny*, 1998). Tokarczuk mostly defines her books as "old things that hold memory," similar to the crystal bowls used by fortune-tellers to read people's past and future. The earlier novel *Primeval and Other Times* comes across both as a stylized fable and as a postmodern

saga. The book chronicles the lives of the inhabitants of a small village, Prawiek (Primeval), over a period of eight decades, beginning in about 1914. There are clues which reveal that this history begins with the First World War and ends sometime in the 1970s, but we are never given exact dates. In the narration process not only are the people (mostly inhabitants of a small village in the central part of Poland) important but also things, objects: a coffee-grinder, a doll, a picture of the Madonna in a local church, a game.

In *Primeval and Other Times* the story is told with a certain distance, somewhat biblically, although some events relate to recent facts from Polish history—the invasion of German soldiers, the coming of the Russian army. Tokarczuk complains that this “biblical touch” or biblical tone was lost in the French translation, because the translator treated the whole story quite literally as a simple family saga (Tokarczuk, “Pop Dreams”).

Yet, history reappears in the next novel, *House of Day, House of Night*, where Tokarczuk proves that she does not want to “escape from history”. In this novel history appears in the form of the theme of Polish-German relations, the Regained Territories. Tokarczuk says:

I tell the whole story as if I was looking at a map, that is, speaking from a point of view above it all, only I tell the story from the kitchen, from home. How it was to have two families in one kitchen, two women cooking and unable to understand one another. How it looked from that side, from the inside. An intimate view. I don't think this is an “escape from history”, just a different perception of history (Tokarczuk, “Pop Dreams”).

The history of Nowa Ruda is by no means straightforward. It lies a few metres away from the Czech border. Villagers can hear Czech discos; Czech border guards observe them. But the people are not indigenous. They are Poles who had left the former eastern Polish lands, the western territories of present-day Belarus and Lithuania, which were joined to Soviet Russia after the Second World War—and had taken up residence in the west, occupying houses that had just been vacated by Germans fleeing to the new borders of post-Nazi Germany. *House of Day, House of Night* is the author's most

personal book and also her most "local." She takes a close look at the area where she lives (in and around the village in the Sudety Mountains on the Polish-Czech border). Among the stories inspired by the place is the tale of the mediaeval Saint Kummernis, a woman whom God saved from an unwanted marriage by giving her the face of Christ. In 2005, the Wierszalin theatre performed a play called *The Victim of Wilgefortis* (an adaptation of the story of Kummernis from Tokarczuk's book). Amongst the props was a sculpture of a woman with a man's face nailed to a cross. The members of a conservative political party (those sitting on the town council responsible for the rental of the theatre building) came across a photograph of the sculpture. These councillors admitted that they had neither read the book nor watched the performance, yet nonetheless accused the Wierszalin of "blasphemy and offence to religious feelings," warning that if the theatre company continued to produce similar plays it would be driven out of Podlasie with sticks (Czapliński 1995).

Another typical feature of Polish postmodernism identified by Fiut is the treatment of people and places on the *periphery*. Tokarczuk often takes her subjects from peripheries. Particularly in both novels mentioned above, she tries to create an axis of the world from the periphery. Additionally, the author tries to write about what is closest to her. Thus, *Primeval and Other Times* is a description of the world of the author's childhood while *House of Day, House of Night* depicts life in Nowa Ruda, her present reality, as she admits: "When you live somewhere, when you take root somewhere, you have the most to say about that place. I think the weakness of my first two books [...] is precisely that I tried to write about something that didn't concern me so much" (Tokarczuk, "Pop Dreams").

The title of *Primeval and Other Times* contains a word play with the concepts of time and space that is unfortunately lost in most translations. "Prawiek" which can be translated as "long time ago" or "prehistoric time" stands for a place, a village in the novel. "Inne czasy" refers literally to "other times" but also to other events in space, because the novel is arranged in small units, each of which is called "czas," a unit of time. Every unit can be measured only by the event which occurs within it. Indeed,

Tokarczuk continues this sense of spatial time, or temporary space, in the novel's first few sentences:

Primeval is the place at the centre of the universe.

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. (Tokarczuk 2007, 5).<sup>9</sup>

The novel proceeds to tell the history of the village by relating the stories of its inhabitants, their animals, their guardian angels, their possessions, their God, and their land. These stories are taken into the units of time which appear at least one time but mostly several times. Everyone and even everything has its own story; not only human beings but also objects and elements of nature. For example: there is The Time of Michał, The Time of Misia's Grinder, The Time of the House, The Time of the Dead, Time of the Lime Trees, The Time of the Orchard.

The structure of the novel seems to be an almost perfect manifestation of Lyotard's theory. All metanarratives have lost their credibility and no grand story can ever be retold. In the postmodern condition, there is no single form of discourse that stands above all others; there is no form of knowledge that is privileged and serves as the ground for all others. The crisis of the metanarratives is especially visible in the units called "The Time of Squire Popielski." The squire is slowly losing his faith: "He hadn't stopped believing in God, but God and all the rest of it were becoming rather flat and expressionless, like the etchings in his Bible" (Tokarczuk 2007, 38). He has doubts about whether God is good. He sees the world in the process of disintegration; the world which is about to be over.

Zygmunt Bauman, the well-known postmodernist philosopher, labels contemporary society as *liquid modernity*, which underlines mobility as indicative of our time (Bauman 2006). For Bauman, what is new about the present moment is the sense that

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<sup>9</sup> Page references are to the Polish edition used by the author of this article. Following its publication, we will be able to substitute the precise page references to the 2009 translation which, incidentally, uses the 2000 Polish edition (Wałbrzych: Ruta) – Eds.

the old social bonds of family and community are being replaced by the concepts of identity that are by their nature fluid and flexible. Modernity originally aimed to break primordial social bonds only to reform and relocate individuals in even stronger new bonds (such as the nation, or the nuclear family). Liquid modernity means strong bonds are removed entirely. In *Primeval and Other Times* a metaphor for approaching *liquid modernity* can be seen in the Czarna river, which runs through the village and every spring floods the meadows. The owner of this area is a local priest who compares the behaviour of the river to the devil's mischief's and tries to prevent another flooding but without success. This "fluid condition" step by step becomes a feature of the characters' identity and touches upon the reality presented in the novel. At the beginning, the family bonds are very strong. Later on, some characters move to the nearby town and slowly lose their previous identity and good relations with those who have remained behind. The daughter (Adelka) visits her father after twenty years of no contact between them.

Poland's meandering political history is secondary to the continuum of all human joys and pains. Tokarczuk pretends that she has tried to find a language which is as simple as possible to describe complicated things. She believes that the idea of the book itself came from the stories she heard from her grandmother: And this is precisely why the narrator must act out the child's part, because the narrator was a child when she heard those stories and now she is retelling them and reflecting the perception of that young age. "Of course, I wrote this book as an adult, that's why the character-narrator is made up of two levels. One has the status of an infant, but there is also a mature level; it appears in those passages of philosophical reflection that a child isn't capable of" (Tokarczuk 2003).

The narrative's complexity reflects not only Tokarczuk's postmodern techniques but also her inner conviction that:

[...] the world is clearly becoming more feminine. In Poland, especially after these various changes, people are tired of all this talk about history, about politics, about Solidarity. They'd like

to experience an ordinary life, the mystery of that life, and that is in my books (Tokarczuk, "Pop Dreams").

The literary expression of such feminization creates a new type of reader who wants to hear peripheral voices and experience the mystery of everyday life. Kitchens, bedrooms, childhood memories, dreams and insomnia, reminiscences and amnesia—these are part of the existential and acoustic spaces from which the voices of this fiction come. Tokarczuk admits that she draws a lot from women's gossip. Tokarczuk is reinterpreting the whole world through the eyes of a woman.

In Tokarczuk's view *Primeval and Other Times* contains the historical Polish experience, projected into a mythological and biblical dimension:

The philosophical problem that I'm obsessed with in this book is related to people who have been freed from history or who have been ground like grain in the mill of history. This question has often been posed by Polish society. The success of *Primeval and Other Times* is due to the fact that this book tries to establish a metaphysical order in a decayed, bowled-over world. We greatly need such integrative, coagulant stories. We need to be founding myths" (Tokarczuk 2003).

*Primeval and Other Times* was very well received in Lithuania and the Czech Republic. Tokarczuk tries to explain this success: "[...] in this book I recreated a fragment of the history and mentalities of Central Europe, and I believe that many people have recognized themselves in this environment, in my characters and in their destiny" (Tokarczuk 2003).

Despite its diversity, the world depicted in *Primeval and Other Times* is a coherent microcosm filled with meaning. In this reality the reader feels safe. But this security does not come from the return to tradition or to memories devoid of any reflection or critical approach. In her style, especially in *Primeval and Other Times*, there is a hint of traditionalism but there is no assumption that is typical of conservative thinking. Tokarczuk does not assume that there is only one universal order which is suitable for everyone. The author, even when she is looking for universal meaning, looks for it only within the framework of her own experience. Her statements prove that she thinks that

there is no such thing as a meta-language that embraces the entirety of *language games* (a term which Lyotard borrows from Wittgenstein):

the Worlds we can see are touching each other but it is not possible to translate one into another. [...] *We can talk to each other but in fact we will never come to an understanding, because human experience is impossible to transfer* (Tokarczuk 1998).

These statements seem to deny the sense of writing itself. Is there a remedy for the fact that the transfer of meaning between the writer and the reader seems to be impossible? One solution is to follow Roland Barthes' advice and separate a literary work from its author in order to liberate it from interpretive tyranny, also bearing in mind that each piece of writing contains multiple layers and meanings. Tokarczuk compares the cooperation of writer and reader to the Rorschach inkblot test.<sup>10</sup> In this psychological test subjects' perceptions of inkblots are recorded and then analyzed using psychological interpretation, complex scientifically derived algorithms, or both. Some psychologists use this test to examine a person's personality characteristics and emotional functioning. It has been employed to detect an underlying thought disorder, especially in cases where patients are reluctant to describe their thinking processes openly. In Tokarczuk's opinion "The writer's job is to create the blobs, but the biggest effort is required from the reader, the effort of understanding, of interpreting them" (Tokarczuk, "Pop Dreams").

In other words, she seems to be convinced that a writer gives a context, but not the text. Roland Barthes draws an analogy between the text and the textiles, declaring that a "text is a fabric of quotations", drawn from "innumerable centres of culture", rather than from one, individual experience (Barthes 1967). Speaking about the description of her literary technique, Tokarczuk also refers to the process of weaving:

I wrote various threads of it at the same time and they began to weave themselves together, and I started to see the common meaning. But that meaning came about on its own, I didn't create it. I'm a psychologist by training, and it seems to me that the writing process is also a psychic process, to

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<sup>10</sup> The test takes its name from that of its creator, Swiss psychologist Hermann Rorschach.

a great extent independent of consciousness. When I begin to get the feeling that I'm in the midst of some theme, then I simply try not to limit it, not to plan, and just to write down what comes into my head. I usually don't know how my novels will end, I don't know what will happen to the characters but because of that the writing process is more interesting to me (Tokarczuk, "Pop Dreams").

Tokarczuk claims that she does not belong to a category of writers who elaborate, meaning that they come up with some ideas and then write about them. "The subject appears spontaneously and even if I do other things, I live with the necessity that I must write about it [...]" (Tokarczuk 2003).

In her prose an alternative solution to communication seems to be giving up the dialogue on both the abstract level and within rational discourse. Instead, dialogue is initiated on the level of intuition, feelings and archetypes. In this case, the problem of the precise transmission of meaning disappears. Perhaps this is the reason why Tokarczuk often takes refuge in allegory, metaphor, and symbolism.

The subconscious, the writer claims, is not only individual but very often collective. In the interviews, Tokarczuk often talks about her respect and admiration for Carl Gustav Jung. In her opinion, Jung belongs to a broad philosophical tradition which overcomes the dualism in the world and which is close to her (Tokarczuk 2000). Inspired by Jung, Tokarczuk populates her worlds with archetypal characters. Most often we meet the *anima* incarnated in different forms.<sup>11</sup> Generally, the *anima* can be identified as the totality of little bits, conscious and unconscious feminine psychological

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<sup>11</sup> The *anima* and *animus*, in Carl Jung's school of analytical psychology, are the unconscious or true inner self of an individual, as opposed to the *persona* (outer aspect of the personality). In the unconscious of the male, it finds expression as a feminine inner personality: the *anima*. It manifests itself by influencing man's interactions with women and his attitudes toward them. The anima is usually an aggregate of a man's mother but may also incorporate aspects of sisters, aunts, and teachers. Jung said that confronting one's shadow self is an "apprentice-piece", while confronting one's anima is the masterpiece. Jung viewed the anima process as being one of the sources of creative ability. The entire process of anima development in a male is about the male subject opening up to emotionality, and in that way a broader spirituality by creating a new conscious paradigm that includes intuitive processes, creativity and imagination, and psychic sensitivity towards himself and others (Jung 1973).

qualities that a male possesses. Jung believed that anima development has four distinct levels, which he named Eve, Helen, Mary, and Sophia.<sup>12</sup>

Tokarczuk touches the first level in an alternative way by choosing the example of the dark side of an *anima* figure. Instead of referring to the mother of mankind, the author creates a character named Kłoska who is physically attractive but at the same time lacks humility: "She brazenly looked everyone in the face, even the priest" (Tokarczuk 2007, 16). We meet her as a barefoot green-eyed beauty who appears in *Prawiek* either in July or in August. "Kłoska" literally means "an ear of wheat."<sup>13</sup> People gave her this name because in the summer she "gathered ears of corn left over after the harvest and roasted them for herself over a fire" (2007, 15). In the autumn, she eats potatoes which she steals from everybody else and when they run out, she makes a trade with local men: offering her body in return for a piece of sausage. During sex she never accepts the man in the dominant position. She would say: "Why should I lie underneath you? I'm your equal" (2007, 16).

The same words are allegedly uttered by a mythological figure named Lilith when she argues with Adam in Paradise. It is worth pointing out that Lilith, who apocryphally is Adam's first wife, appears in a cultural context a long time before the non-biblical Jewish tradition considered her to be the first woman created by God.<sup>14</sup> In the Mesopotamian mythology, she is a storm demon associated with the wind and was thought to be a bearer of disease and death.<sup>15</sup> Belonging to Hebrew mediaeval folk

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<sup>12</sup> In the first stage, Eve, the anima is indistinguishable from the personal mother. In the second stage, personified in the historical figure of Helen of Troy, the anima is a collective and ideal sexual image. The third stage, Mary, manifests itself in religious feelings and a capacity for lasting relationships. In the fourth stage, as Sophia (called Wisdom in the Bible), a man's anima functions as a guide to the inner life, mediating to consciousness the contents of the unconscious.

<sup>13</sup> Lloyd-Jones translates her name as Cornspike; in this article we retain the Polish – Eds.

<sup>14</sup> The Book of Isaiah 34:14, describing the desolation of Edom, is the only occurrence of *Lilith* in the Hebrew Bible. Lilith appears as a night demon in the Jewish lore and as a screech owl in the King James version of the Bible.

<sup>15</sup> The figure of Lilith first appeared in a class of wind and storm demons or spirits as *Lilitu*, in Sumer, circa 3000 BC. Many scholars place the origin of the phonetic name "Lilith" at somewhere around 700 BC. The earliest reference to a demon similar to Lilith and companion of Lillake/Lilith is on the Sumerian king list, where Gilgamesh's father is named as Lillu. Little is known of Lillu and he was said to disturb

tradition *The Alphabet of Ben Sira*<sup>16</sup> is considered to be the oldest form of the story of Lilith as Adam's first wife. The idea that Adam had a wife prior to Eve may have developed from an interpretation of the Book of Genesis and its dual creation accounts; while Genesis 2:22 describes God's creation of Eve from Adam's rib, an earlier passage, 1:27, already indicates that a woman and a man had been made at the same time. The text places Lilith's creation after God's words in Genesis 2:18 that "it is not good for man to be alone" (Book of Genesis 2:18). He forms Lilith out of the clay from which he made Adam. Lilith claims that since she and Adam were created in the same way, they were equal, and refuses to "lie below" him (Sheridan 1994, 100). This act of rebellion against the dominance of the male, which was invented by the Rabbi, is a testimony of man's fear of the emancipated and fully realized woman who is capable of making up her own mind whether it is about sex or other matters.

Both women exist in the space of "voluntary exile." Lilith escapes from Paradise across the Red Sea where she mates with demons and gives birth to their offspring (according to The Book of Zohar). The village Prawiek can be seen as a less perfect equivalent of Eden—the lives of its inhabitants are ruled according to a hierarchy based mostly on patriarchal structures. Perhaps this is the reason why Kłoska is not willing to accept the patriarchal societal rules and chooses to live in a forest. Both Lilith and Kłoska are rebellious, not at all humble and refuse to be obedient servants of the male dominated society. The local squire's wife Mrs Popielska, worried about the future of pregnant Kłoska offers her a job in her manor-house. At the same time, she criticizes her way of life, especially promiscuity. On Kłoska's side, there is no humility or gratefulness for the lady's offer. Instead, the ungrateful girl rejects her offer in the most impolite way, expressing her love for freedom and sense of dignity. With this reaction,

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women in their sleep and had functions of an incubus, while Lilitu appeared to men in their erotic dreams. (Black and Green 2003, 118).

<sup>16</sup> *The Alphabet of Ben Sira* is dated between 8th and 10th centuries. Its real author is anonymous, but it is falsely attributed to the sage Ben Sira. The amulets used against Lilith that were thought to derive from this tradition are in fact dated as being much older. The concept of Eve having a predecessor is not exclusive to Ben Sira, and is not a new concept, as it can be found in Genesis Rabbah. However, the idea that Lilith was the predecessor is indeed exclusive to Sira. See also Sawyer 1996.

the girl proves that she can be on her own wherever she wants, even if she has to pay a high price for her independence. She gives birth to her baby in solitude, frightened by the pain which is much stronger than she had expected. The child is a stillborn. After the delivery she has a dream. In it she sees a beautiful woman, “as large as a tree.” The woman takes Kłoska in her arms and breastfeeds her: her “cracked lips found the nipple. It smelled of animal fur, camomile and rue” (Tokarczuk 2007, 23). This figure bears a resemblance to the “Mother Goddess” depicted in different cultural traditions in many variations. In this appearance she manifests both her aspects: a destructive and creative one. On the one hand, she is demonic, hungry for offerings from human beings—she takes away the life of a newborn child. Yet, it is thanks to her that the girl exhausted by labour regains her strength and is born anew: wherever her fingers touch Kłoska’s body it becomes infused with a sensation of bliss and immortality. This experience completely changes Kłoska’s perception of reality. Awakened, she looks around and everything is different:

It was no longer a world consisting of objects, of things, phenomena that exist alongside each other. Now what [Kłoska] saw had become one single mass, one great animal or one great person, who took on many forms, to burgeon, to die and born again. Everything around [Kłoska] was one single body. and her body was a part of this great body – enormous, omnipotent, unimaginably mighty (Tokarczuk 2007, 24).

Since then, she can see much more than she could see before. “She could see the force that pervades everything, she could understand how it works. She could see the contours of other worlds and other times, stretched out above and below ours. She could also see things that cannot be described in words” (Tokarczuk 2007, 25). Enriched by this knowledge Kłoska gains the possibility of predicting the future. For example, she can see the herald of approaching war in a fruit. She eats poisonous mushrooms without any harm. She makes love with a huge herb transformed into a man. She sleeps with a reptile domesticated by herself and wears him as a necklace. Such a close relationship with a serpent refers once again to the iconography of Lilith. This motif can be interpreted in different ways. Seen in the context of the Bible, the serpent is a

representative of evil. That is why the local priest is so afraid when he sees them together. According to the words of God, a woman and a reptile should be enemies not friends (Genesis, 3:14-17). But having the biblical background in mind, we should also notice that the roles are reversed. Kłoska tempts the serpent with a bowl of milk and later with her body. She is successful in taming it. The serpent even falls in love with her and brings the gifts to the woman to show its feelings. Once she is given an apple but she treats this present as kind of joke and smiles. She finds it funny that in the situation it tries to play its traditional role. But maybe the most surprising thing is that the serpent—like every character in the book—has its own angel: the dragon which lives on the sun.

The Book of Genesis can be seen as the story of the fall of humans but also as a story of enlightenment. If we choose the second version, the serpent gives humans the possibility to obtain consciousness. In this case Kłoska gains real wisdom, taken not from observing the rules but from her own visions and watching the rhythm of nature. The serpent is also an attribute of the divine healers. Kłoska's milk has healing properties. Kłoska also recalls Demeter, maternal Goddess of the Earth, and especially of cultivated land. One of her attributes is wheat. What is more, we can find similarities between Kłoska and her daughter, Ruta, and between Demeter and her daughter, Persephone. Ruta attracts the attention of a rich man from the town and wants to marry him. Kłoska agrees on condition that the daughter will spend every summer with her.

The vision experienced by Kłoska in which the universe is like a big living creature, and a human being like a small universe, can be found in Greek antiquity, in medieval culture and in Jewish mysticism (Eco 2005, 77). From this vision comes the theory known as *homo quadratus*. In this concept, a number has its symbolic meanings and is the principle of the universe. The basic number is a number four as in most cases, what we find in nature can be divided into four. There are four seasons, four directions of the wind, four phases of the moon. Four is also the number of human beings because according to Vitruvius the width of a man with spread arms is equal to his height, thus providing the base for an ideal square.

Number four is also important for the image of the village described by Tokarczuk. Prawiek is surrounded by four borders. Every border is guarded by one angel. So, the dwellers have four protectors: Raphael, Gabriel, Michael and Uriel. In the centre of the village there is a hill made by God himself. In the mysterious Game which Squire Popielski receives from the Rabbi, God creates man while creating the Fourth World. In the whole game there are eight Worlds, which is a double of the number 4. Tokarczuk builds a myth, a history with a rigid order.

Kłoska learns from the inside. In describing this process, Tokarczuk points out two ways of learning: from the outside and from the inside. The first is considered to be the best and sometimes the only one. People learn by travelling to far-away places, by watching, reading, listening to lectures at universities. But this kind of learning does not change a human being only from the outside. It is like putting on clothes. This reflection also shows Tokarczuk's distrust of modern ways of cognition. But we cannot say that it is a simple opposition. This way is not just irrational, as if in opposition to René Descartes' proposal. It is rather *trans-rational*. And it is not a completely new way. It reminds one of gnosis and its concept of receiving knowledge from revelation and direct inner experiences.

This shows that Tokarczuk is not a typical postmodernist writer, interested only in language games. To conclude I propose to let the writer herself tell us about her writing, her interest in language and storytelling:

I think I'm a classicist when it comes to language. For me the language is only a tool by which to bring about an image. [...] And in this regard I don't concentrate on the form. Language serves to depict something. My urge to play with the reader is not in the language, not in the form, not in the plot, but more in the construction of images. I think of my writing as writing in pictures, that is, the translation of images into words, and I want to construct these images so that they will be, as I said, open to interpretation. These images have a certain degree of complexity, because I know that there are different types of people, and I'd like each of them to be able to receive something (Tokarczuk, "Pop Dreams").

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