

# SENSE AND SENSITIVITY

Olga Tokarczuk is among the pioneers exploring a certain turn towards emotions, artistic efforts that value sensation over thought.



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**O**lga Tokarczuk's Nobel Lecture, entitled "The Tender Narrator," explored the nature of a fiction-writer's need to be sensitive to the world and to others. The Polish audience, listening in anxious suspense, was a bit surprised when she spoke about this using the term *czułość* "tenderness" – in one stroke, essentially pulling this Polish word out of near oblivion. For Tokarczuk, *czułość* is a very specific kind of tender sensitivity, it is "spontaneous and disinterested; it goes far beyond empathetic fellow feeling." She further described it thus:

Tenderness is the most modest form of love. It is the kind of love that does not appear in the scriptures or the gospels, no one swears by it, no one cites it. It has no special emblems or symbols, nor does it lead to crime, or prompt envy. It appears wherever we take a close and careful look at another being, at something that is not our "self".<sup>1</sup>

This word *czułość* "tenderness," which Tokarczuk focused some attention in her Nobel lecture, had essentially only survived in older works of Polish literature, not very well known today. With one notable exception, however: if *czułość* did retain a certain small footing in the consciousness of modern readers it was thanks to a single author, and thanks to a single work of his, at that – a short verse by the esteemed poet Cyprian Kamil Norwid, with "Czułość" (Tenderness) as its very title. So perhaps Tokarczuk was mistaken on one point, as it seems that that a certain "special emblem" of *czułość* does indeed exist in Polish literature – let us cite Norwid's poem here in full:

Tenderness can be like a battle cry,  
Like the murmur of a hidden spring  
And like a funeral dirge...

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And like a long braid of golden strands  
On which a widower hangs  
His ancient silver watch – - -<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Trans. Jennifer Croft and Antonia Lloyd-Jones, www.nobelprize.org. © The Nobel Foundation 2019.

<sup>2</sup>From Norwid's collection *Vade-Mecum*, completed around 1866, trans. Claire S. Allen, *The Sarmatian Review*, September 1993.

This verse, which is familiar to many Poles from literature class in school and has been interpreted in a broad variety of ways, also provides us with a certain expanded definition of tenderness. Norwid's image of a silver watch kept by a husband hanging on a braid of his late wife's hair, as a final memento of her, encapsulates a sentiment typical of certain lower strata of the bourgeoisie in the mid-nineteenth century. Charles Bovary also makes himself such a watch-chain in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and we also see them on the vests of several provincial men in his *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. In other words, the sort of tenderness that Norwid was striving to capture with this image was neither an aristocratic nor a plebian emotion. Rather, it was a harbinger of the sentiments of the middle class, which a vast majority of today's society is heir to. In this sense, *czułość* "tenderness" represents the final reflex of romanticism – as distant from *frénétisme* as the sun from the moon. It is an emotion legitimized, permitted and treated with indulgent understanding. A true cork plugging up a great big bottle of despair.

Polish lexicographers have treated the notion of *czułość* with some degree of caution – as an unstable state of the soul, ready at any point to cry out in desperation or to sink into deadly melancholy (as Norwid tells us). In one of the first major monolingual Polish dictionaries (that of Karłowicz, Kryński & Niedźwiedzki from 120 years ago), the noun *czułość* figures only in a medical sense. Instead, the dictionary pays more attention to the related adjective *czuły*, citing its various senses as "sensitive to stimuli," "vigilant," "warm-hearted," "ardent," even "sleepless." Last of all comes the sense that seems so obvious to Polish speakers today: the capacity of an indicator or instrument to register small changes in some observed object. Sensitive as a seismograph or a Geiger counter – this is the sense Poles predominantly use the words *czuły/czułość* today (as is reflected in some of the other articles in this issue of *Academia* magazine).

Interestingly, the sense of the word *czułość* "tenderness" that we see back in Norwid, and now recently dusted off and granted a new lease-on-life by Tokarczuk, seems to capitalize upon all of these meanings at once: denoting a vigilant, warm-hearted, ardent sensitivity to even slight differences in the world and the people around us. It is deeply rooted in the sense of touch, which means also sometimes a sense of pain. *Czułość* "tenderness" corresponds with a certain sensitivity to wrongdoing, to the fragility of existence, as is felt so acutely by the Polish Nobelist. There is nothing over-affectionate or soppy about it: sentimentalism or hypersensitivity hermetically shut up the borders of the ego, instead of throwing it open to the experiences and feelings of other beings. Rather, this is an empathetic opening, hinging not only on



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individual sensibilities but also on a certain vision of the world. And, as is sometimes the case with visions, it is a pure intuitional revelation of the essential nature of things. The essence of this revelation lies in refuting the widespread conviction that the world of nature and the laws that govern it are soulless and completely indifferent to all its component parts, including humans. It is a stance of awareness towards the world of nature that Tokarczuk sees as a litmus test for modern-day sensitivity. As she put it in her Nobel lecture:

We are all – people, plants, animals, and objects – immersed in a single space, which is ruled by the laws of physics. (...) Our cardiovascular system is like the system of a river basin, the structure of a leaf is like a human transport system, the motion of the galaxies is like the whirl of water flowing down our washbasins. (...) The micro and macro scale show an endless system of similarities.

This is not a new view, but it is also not an expression of traditional humanism. It involves a vision of the world which would turn any self-proclaimed “lord of creation” into a brother of all beings. With such

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a turning of the tables, the delicate treatment of others becomes a condition for the continuity and moral connectivity of the world. Beginning as a gesture, it becomes a way of being. It is clear that this image of beings submerged in unity, subject to the very same laws of physics (how democratic gravity is!), was not described by Tokarczuk not for edificational purposes. The point is to reform not thinking, but feeling. It is enough to realize what psychological states are excluded by this new tenderness: predation, the power drive, envy, obtuseness, intolerance – the very same moral instincts that have underlain several large religions that have nevertheless been unable to actually make them a reality. The “feeling being” that Tokarczuk speaks about in her sketches and thinks about in her prose is the antithesis of the Cartesian approach to the concept. Its distinguishing feature, the writer holds, lies not in “possessing reason” but in “the capacity to experience suffering and pleasure.” Briefly put, Olga

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Tokarczuk’s thinking aims towards forging an alliance – somewhat forced, let’s admit – between the intellect and so-called weak thought. Tender sensitivity clearly levels an indictment against all forms of maliciousness, irony, or cognitive skepticism; what rises to the fore is the mystery of existence. A mystery that is irreducible to a riddle, because – in line with Gabriel Macel’s intuition – a mystery is not something that gets passed on, but rather something one lives within. It is what encompasses our existence. Of course such a metaphor may have religious foundations (ultimately drawing upon theological sources). But it also can, like in the case of Tokarczuk, enter into an alliance with a certain noninstitutional spirituality. This has already been noted long ago. “At issue here,” the prominent critic Kinga Dunin wrote, “is a certain way of thinking that is kindred to religion, the most noble representatives of which in today’s world are frequently atheists. This is a kind of religiousness that never pads itself a comfortable place in any church, one that also shows a certain kinship with utopia. The cautious utopia of late modernity, which is not so bold as to pursue projects, but is so bold as to believe in the non-necessity of the existing ways of organizing the world.”<sup>3</sup>

The utopia that Dunin discusses remains essentially the reverse side of the real world, undertaking a mission of anticipating transformations in sensitivity and evaluation. Moving onto the island of Utopia therefore means consenting to a small socio-ethnic rebellion. To the extolment of weakness, to the equal empowerment of the excluded, to respect for all manifestations of life. Tokarczuk’s above-cited sketch “*Maski Zwierząt*” [Animal Masks] also includes the following fragment:

Empathy has a relatively short tenure in the history of humankind. It most likely appeared somewhere in the East, at least six centuries before Christ. In any event, no one prior to the Buddhist teachings imparted a name or value to this new stance: looking upon another being as if we were that being ourselves, not trusting the ostensible borderline that divides us from others, because it is an illusion. Whatever happens to you, happens to me.<sup>4</sup>

If such an empathetic stance is combined with the dynamics of what Tokarczuk calls *wgląd* “insight,” we

<sup>3</sup> Kinga Dunin, forward to *Moment niedźwiedzia*. Trans. of this fragment Daniel J. Sax.

<sup>4</sup> *Krytyka Polityczna*, 2008, nr 15. Trans. of this fragment Daniel J. Sax.

arrive at an answer to why her writing shows a tendency for – as she herself calls it in her article “*Powiem wam, kto uratuje świat*” [I’ll Tell You Who Will Save the World] – a “panoptical perspective” that looks both from a bird’s-eye view and from within a micro-organism. This “double-sight” dissolves borders, rolls up and unfurls panoramas, freely operates with time and space. “Insight is a sudden, all-encompassing, spontaneous realization, in one swoop, of the essence of what is perceived. It is a special type of perception – multi-level and parallel. (...) It is a diagnosis that is intellectual, emotional and intuitive at the same time.” This description should not be checked against an academic lecture on phenomenology or a textbook of figure psychology (Gestalt therapy), but rather skillfully measured against Tokarczuk’s own prose. It suffices to familiarize oneself with the stories of *House of Day*, *House of Night* to dissect the analytical tendencies we are discussing from the descriptions of the main characters: viewing from a bird’s-eye perspective various emotional-cognitive powers at the same time, seeking empirical limitations – both of physical spacetime, and of the fictional chronotope. Let us take the description of the character “Whatsisname”:

Whatsisname is one of those people who imagine that God is over there, while they’re over here. Whatsisname sees everything as being outside himself – he even sees himself from the outside, and looks at himself the way he looks at a photograph. He can only relate to himself in the mirror. (...) [E]ven to himself Whatsisname is on the outside. There’s nothing inside him looking out, so he has no reflection. That’s why he sees ghosts.<sup>5</sup>

Here we have Tokarczuk’s distinctive theory of spiritual osmosis, of psychological intensities getting leveled out between an individual and the environment, of existential substance flowing between individual entities. Because if Whatsisname has his space for mental reflection empty, a ghost can slip into it – within certain limits, the poet says, within certain sensible limits. An excess would entail disintegration, whereas in Tokarczuk’s world everything generally strives towards integration – partially pan-psyche integration. The tender narrator which she spoke of in her Nobel lecture is indeed a driver of and mouthpiece for such a process. This “fourth grammatical person,” which does not exist but which can be linked by association to the fourth dimension, is essentially meant to be a fulfillment of the demand for supersense, a kind of insight that would enable one to freely pass through

walls and worlds, to slice through biological and psychological life, to transcend and wander with souls – or without them:

If someone could look down on us from above, they’d see that the world is full of people running about in a hurry, sweating and very tired, and their lost souls, always left behind, unable to keep up with their owners. The result is great confusion as the souls lose their heads and the people cease to have hearts. The souls know they’ve lost their owners, but most of the people don’t realize that they’ve lost their own souls.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, we could read this fragment from *Lost Soul* as a small treatise on losing one’s way in modern times. But I cite the passage for the sake of the integrative viewpoint repeated here: from above the world but at the same time from within it, the viewpoint of a “super-seer,” using the same super-sense of observation to encompass the peregrinations of animals, people, ghosts, and spirits. Melancholy, or perhaps even despair at the loss of spiritual life is here conveyed as a situation of failing to cross paths with a loved-

Tokarczuk’s “panoptical perspective” that takes both a bird’s-eye and microscopic view, dissolving borders, freely operating with time and space.

one. A painful situation, but nevertheless one that is remediable – via the tenderness of the universe. This is because tenderness in Tokarczuk’s work remains an important component of *modus vivendi*, not only *scribendi*. And sometimes it gets expressed explicitly as a certain delicacy with respect to the world of the living – and to the world of things.

Tokarczuk tries to project a world in which the factor of domination, of ruling, is weakened. This is probably why she propagates a formula of poetics that privileges the reader and the story itself, at the author’s own expense. Literature composed around an imperative of tenderness here also turns against figures of power and its various shadows – such as overassuredness and veiled violence. ■

<sup>5</sup>Trans. Antonia Lloyd-Jones. *House of Day, House of Night*. (fragment omitted from Granta Books edition, 2002).

<sup>6</sup>Trans. Antonia Lloyd-Jones. *Lost Souls*. Seven Stories Press (to appear in 2021).