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Encounter with(in) Other Times. On Two Novels by Olga Tokarczuk

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Abstract. Olga Tokarczuk's novels take place in the mazes of time. This paper explores what disjunctions and connections her novels such as *Primeval and Other Times* (2010 [1996]) or *House of Day, House of Night* (2003 [1998]) reveal and how we can navigate between the events of a time, the resonances between times, and the attempts to encounter different times. To what extent do the practices of reading and writing the Tokarczuk novels correspond to art theoretical thinking based on the historical regimes of aesthetics and the notion of historicity, and where do they raise questions that prompt a rethinking of these paradigms? The practice-oriented physics and eco-rhythmology proposed by me should also be put to a similar test in order to see what support they provide for research into the practical orientation of Tokarczuk's novels in times and where the art of writing under examination prompts new/further hypotheses.

Keywords: multiple temporalities, unreflective learning, rhythm, sympathy, Tokarczuk.

The Time and Ghosts of an Unreflective Learning

The past, present, and future mazes of time force us all to find our way. Obviously, not everything depends on us, but what happens to us is always connected to how we practically orient ourselves in and between events. From my previous research in practice-oriented physics and eco-rhythmology (Berszán 2018), I have found that artistic practices, including literary writing and reading, are highly demanding attempts to orient oneself in time. In this paper, I will show this in two novels by Olga Tokarczuk that can be correlated with historical periods. One trace of *Primeval and Other Times* (2010 [1996]) connects the period of the First World War with the Second and then with the new socialist regime, while the events in *House of Day, House of Night* (2003 [1998]) belong to the post-

communist period. But such classifications are impermissibly simplistic; these novels do not describe historical periods but experimentally explore how we can encounter other times in order to meet someone or something in them.[1]

In the writing art of Olga Tokarczuk, time is always the time of something or someone: the time of Genowefa, who is left without her husband during the war, the time of squire Popielski, the time of Misia's angel, the time of the dog called Dolly, the time of the mushroom spawn, the time of Dipper the drowned man, the time of Misia's grinder, the time of the Game, the time of God... Time is everything that happens to something or someone. It is not enough to identify periods and places because the combination of these does not capture everything that happens then and there.[2] Both then and there are very diverse: exactly as diverse as what happens then and there to someone or something. Thus, the only recommendable way of periodization must involve the recognition and acceptance of alternatives as in this attempt: *Primeval and Other Times*. Such a circumspection obviously not only refers to other ages but also takes account of other times there and then which we cannot fully account for because there may be times for which we have no word: e.g. the dog's pictorial "thinking," the dream of trees or the turning from the "time of apple trees" to the "time of pear trees," the corporeal visions of Cornspike's parturient body, the two different factures of air, or the colours of different ages in Marta's memory.

As the stories testify – not only by their plot but by their writing art as well –, the time of someone or something can also happen to an unreflective follower: to the dreamer, the village neighbour living in a constant now or a time-seer quack, as well as to the curious narrator or her literary reader. And everything or everybody whose time we encounter in this way becomes alive, even if in reality they are not or no longer alive: the house, the stream, the coffee grinder, the suffering monster of a local legend, a monk from hundreds of years earlier, or the saint whose life he is writing. How is this possible? Olga Tokarczuk's novels are a practical exploration of this question, and readers are involved in their experiments.

The more we distance ourselves from the events of our existence in Western culture, the more superior we declare ourselves to be – not only phylogenetically but also culturally. Reflection is not only ranked among the highest psychic functions but is also honoured as a basic principle of our orientation in the world. Tokarczuk, who had previously replaced her psychological studies with literary experiments, sobered up from this hubris and became genuinely curious about the events of existence, more interesting to her than their explanations. She is seduced by the rhythms and melodies of the times rather than by certain

1 On Tokarczuk's particular approach to time, see also Katarzyna Olga Beilin (2001).

2 Critics of Tokarczuk often explain this as an artistic interest in the narrative of everyday life (Gosk 2007).

concatenations of things that can be appropriated by our purposes. What is at stake for her is to learn how to navigate in different temporalities. She readily admits that our personal and/or human existence is only a place in a huge universe "on the vast ladder of existences" (Tokarczuk 2010, 9). Consequently, it is absolutely worth wandering, at least around the neighbourhood, instead of getting bogged down in our own creatures and installations.[3]

"People think they live more intensely than animals, than plants, and especially than things. Animals sense that they live more intensely than plants and things. Plants dream that they live more intensely than things. But things last, and this lasting is more alive than anything else" (Tokarczuk 2010, 26). In this ironic taxonomy, our whole hierarchy built on phylogenesis is turned upside down like an hourglass: higher psychic functions are found to be increasingly distant from the events of our existence, which we tend to downgrade, despise, and forget. What kind of life is it that forgets the events of existence? It is not difficult to answer: a life trapped in the enclosures of culture and civilization, increasingly and violently adapted to the ever-newer demands of established systems and institutions proclaimed superior to individuals. Think about our academic way of life, for instance, or the idol of endless economic growth (Eastwood and Heron 2024). Tokarczuk's novels invite us to risk our constructed civilized positions and ways of life for the sake of existence. The author became very interested in the "primeval" dimensions of existence, in its basic rhythms as different times than our culturally dominant bezoars.

In *House of Day, House of Night*, the narrator reads aloud from a sixpenny edition the life of an old saint, Kummernis of Schönau, to a country neighbour, the elderly Marta. It is this non-professional listener who asks the crucial question that becomes the key to the whole novel: *Who wrote the life of the saint, and how he knew it at all?* Since we read: 1) the saint's own notes about her extraordinary experiences, 2) the account of the monk Paschalis who wrote the life of Kummernis, and 3) the novel of which these are the characters, from our point of view Marta's question is addressed to Kummernis, Paschalis, and Olga Tokarczuk at the same time. How do they know all this? And since the author describes many other characters and events in the novel, which also make the question legitimate, the whole *House of Day, House of Night*, and even the *Primeval and Other Times* become the field of Marta's interest. Who wrote it down, and how did they know about what happened to Kummernis, to Paschalis, to Marek Marek, to the bird in Marek Marek, to the paralysed Genowefa as a witness of the war massacre, what happened in Cornspike's bodily visions during childbirth, in the dreams of others, in the eight worlds of the cabalistic game, in the narrative experience

3 Timothy Morton regards the recognition and acknowledgement of the temporalities of other life forms as a necessary corollary of ecological existence: "it's the case that from grasses to gorillas to gargantuan black holes, everything has its own time, its own temporality" (Morton 2018, 50).

of exiting time, in the still ongoing struggle between Arkhemanes's Khthonos, Chaos, and Cronos, in the time-travelling seer's adventure or the future-seeing prophecies of Cornspike?

A reading discovery of all these does not come naturally because we tend to distance ourselves from such dubious access to another time or the other's time. We are more inclined to hear sceptical criticism than curiosity in Marta's question, although it is not at all likely that she intended it as criticism. The contemporary narrator also uses a stigmatizing sarcasm calling his neighbour Whatsisname, who is so incapable of reflection that he sees even himself only as a this-and-that there in the mirror, i.e. as an external phenomenon. Their first encounter also makes a distinctly repulsive impression on him: "he was standing on our terrace with his mouth open, pointing into his rotting maw, looking like a shaggy, ugly little gnome, the sort that spring up by the hundreds under the amanita caps each summer" (Tokarczuk 2003, 139–140). In this description, there is evidently a sense of horror of the inferior, the uncivilized, the "bad-faced" from the positions of our superiority, our civilization, our well-combed manner: "So I withdrew to the threshold and barred his entry. Panicking, I started wondering how to get to the phone without letting him out of my sight" (Tokarczuk 2003, 140). The chapter, which includes Whatsisname's story of a fearsome lake creature, is titled *The monster*, but as we begin to empathize with the plight of the legendary lake monster, our perception concerning Whatsisname also takes an unexpected turn.

> – Why is it that Whatsisname sees ghosts [Marek Marek, his neighbour who had hanged himself several days before, appears near the kitchen stove after his death] and I don't? – I once asked Marta. She replied because he was empty inside. At the time I took this to mean that Whatsisname was stupid and simple-minded. I felt that a full person was more valuable than an empty one. (Tokarczuk 2003, 12)

But later the narrator realizes what Marta meant to say: even for himself, Whatsisname remains outside himself: "There is nothing in Whatsisname that looks from inside, so there is no reflection. That's when you see ghosts" (Tokarczuk 2003, 12). The narrator discovers that this ability rivals the "performance" of the dreamers, whom she describes as having images but not possessing themselves: "Meanwhile their minds see images, but they aren't in control of themselves" (Tokarczuk 2003, 88). Just as Kummernis's levitation over the monastery is a journey without a self. This is what the inscription under the statue of the crucified holy woman indicates: "Ego dormio et cor meum vigilat"[4] (Tokarczuk 2003, 51). And the same is repeated in the narrator's dream, the overture to *House of Day, House of Night*, from which the whole "plot" unfolds: "I dreamed I was

4 I slept, but my heart was awake. *Song of Songs* 5:2 (Revised Standard Version).

pure sight, without a body or a name. I was suspended high above a valley at some undefined point from which I could see everything. […] I could see a valley with a house standing in the middle of it, but it wasn't my house, or my valley, because nothing belonged to me. I didn't even belong to myself" (Tokarczuk 2003, 1).

It seems that it is important, not only for the prioress advising Paschalis about writing the life of the saint but also for Olga Tokarczuk that the narrator and the reader need to see whoever/whichever he/she is writing or reading as no less real and alive than the way Whatsisname sees the already dead Marek Marek appearing by the fireplace. My hypothesis is that the visionary and poetic quality of Tokarczuk's novels (Márton 2011, 273) is not a rhetorical achievement but rather the result of seeing without reflection – out of a determined will (or rather, an irresistible pull) to seek the temporal order of the world in the events of existence rather than in their representations, in logical constructs we create, or in the provisions of institutions and authorities that seem omnipotent but that in fact are as fragile as all that exists.[5]

In the opening of *Primeval and Other Times*, there is also a kind of vision that is significant for the whole novel. This time, Misia's angel (who received the newborn behind the midwife) reveals the kind of sharing in the other's time, which is, as we soon see, also the narrator's practice:[6]

> The angel saw Misia's birth in an entirely different way from Kucmerka the midwife. An angel generally sees everything in a different way. Angels perceive the world not through the physical forms which it keeps producing and then destroying, but through the meaning and soul of those forms. [...] It was filled with unusual, angelic tenderness, loving sympathy – that is the only feeling angels harbour. (Tokarczuk 2010, 8)

In the next chapter, we enter *The Time of Cornspike*, in which the world-learning of a woman in abject poverty continues the angelic attempts to connect with the world beyond reflection and external information. The narrator follows, with a sympathy comparable to that of an angel, the anguish of the woman in labour, abandoned in the forest, taking part in her bodily visions and following the burial of her newborn baby who died for lack of help.

Cornspike does not learn in the usual way, by taking account of what happens outside of us. Such knowledge we only put on ourselves. "But he who learns by taking things inside himself undergoes constant transformation, because he

5 On the exaggerated role of public institutions, see the study by Hanna Gosk cited earlier: "This new outlook includes the depoliticization of the life of Polish society, the attenuation of the ideological factor, the narrowing down of the role of officialdom in individual lives, and the filling of the space thus vacated with personal matters of primarily local significance" (Tokarczuk 2003, 102).

6 On subjectivity beyond the self, see also Karina Jarzyńska (2023).

incorporates what he learns into his being" (Tokarczuk 2010, 10). We read the same thing earlier about the angel: "he does not have to draw anything from outside: he comes to know the world through himself, he includes all knowledge of the world and of himself – that is how God created him" (Tokarczuk 2010, 9). The sympathy of which not only the angel is capable, but we too, enables us to follow and experience what is happening in the time of the other.

It is also how the narrator knows about all that happens to Cornspike in the forest, when she gives birth without any help. Absorbing her bodily visions of pain is learning, a way of learning to learn, so to speak. This is what makes possible the strange vision that the opening of *House of Day, House of Night* reveals in a dream: "[i]t seemed as if the world below was yielding to me as I looked at it, constantly moving towards me, and then away, so first I could see everything, then only tiny details" (Tokarczuk 2003, 1). By embracing vividly and painfully the events of existence in experiencing birth and death, Cornspike learns to see the world in a completely different way than before:

> And yet now Cornspike could see how the grasshopper was joined to the sky, and what was keeping the hazel bushes by the forest path. She could see more than that too. She could see the force that pervades everything [...]. 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 2010, 14)

How Can a Disembodied Angel Shudder?

The narrative not only thematizes these practices of sympathy, of learning by inclusion, and of seeing without reflection but also learns through sympathy and inclusion itself. The visions of other times (or the other's time) emerge from these experiments, which involve us, the readers as well to such learning and seeing. What we read about the angel is also true in literary practices: "The only instinct angels have is the instinct for sympathy. The only feeling angels have is infinite sympathy, heavy as the firmament" (Tokarczuk 2010, 8); and again: "pure wisdom […] can only be enriched by simple intuition" (Tokarczuk 2010, 9). Why is intuition simple? Because it is a perception of something that is already happening to me. Intuition can only become a way of learning once I am perceptually close to what I am learning, which means that what I am learning becomes visible, audible, and tangible. But not by some magic that only the privileged can do: the thing to be learned can become visible, audible, and perceptible to all who see, hear, and live. But these are indispensable requirements, i.e. we need everything that makes us see, hear, and live, including the right skills. This is Cornspike's secret.

And also the narrator's. For it is not only the eye that is a prerequisite for spotting, say, forest beasts in time (before they can see you), but also the right skills of looking; the arm is a prerequisite not only for swimming but also for practising the gestures of paddling in water. In the same way, intuition requires not only the organic and neural equipment for seeing and hearing but also learning, experimenting with what I am learning, as fully equipped as possible.

It is not worth replacing with data grasped by mere reason and words what I can enrich with the rest of my equipment up to the point of intuition. Reason alone is very poor because it lacks sight, hearing, life, and visceral intuitions. It narrows down to a few categories and contexts what is going on in sumptuous nuances and vivid connections. It is enough to compare how many colours we can name and how many we can see; how many sounds we can name and how many we can hear; how many tastes we can name and how many we can distinguish by taste; how many sensations we can name and how many we can experience by touch; how many feelings we can name and how many we can feel. The same difference exists between understanding how to ride a horse and discovering what it is like to ride; or between understanding how to coordinate our hands and feet to swim and discovering what it is like to swim.

Reason responds to the questions beginning with *why*…? and is usually informed by relatively few whys and few answers about an event. Much richer are the questions and answers when the *what is it like?* is at stake.[7] Intuition that avoids the fallacies of thought is not exceptional because it is mysterious. The source of its richness is what all comes into play: not just an idea, not just one or two models, not just a few synonyms but a much more considerable part of our entire bodily-mental equipment and a much more considerable part of the inexhaustibility of the thing or event learned or understood. The intellect simplifies, that is its strategy; it is the clearest when it is the simplest. The most desirable thing for knowledge is the theory of everything[8] or a single formula of the world.[9] In comparison, intuition is susceptible to all the nuances that are accessible, traceable, perceivable, and imaginable. Intuition is unified only in its intensity, as otherwise it need not fit into a single conceptual scheme or expression. That is why we cannot find the words when we want to express a hunch. This is why we have to learn to read and write literature in order to write and read intuitions. Our kids are learning literature for many years. Do we teach them to read intuitions?

Let us practise with Tokarczuk's novels. When she writes something, she encourages and teaches us not to be satisfied with the whys and wherefores but to remain receptive to what it is like what we write and read:

7 In contemporary Hungarian literature, see, for example, Ádám Bodor's short story *Milyen is egy hágó?* [What Is a Pass Like?] (Bodor 1980).

8 See string theory (Greene 2003 [1999]); see Object-Oriented Ontology (Harman 2017).

9 See Einstein's conclusion: $E = mc^2$ (1916).

> Marta and I were sitting on the wooden steps of the terrace. R. had made a horseradish ointment using home-made alcohol and I was rubbing Marta's hands with it.
> Marta is old. The skin on her hands is thin and smooth, and covered in brown spots. […] Beneath the skin I could feel fragile little bones that were swollen around the joints. It was rheumatism that was causing her pain, like a frost in the body. Maybe that's why Marta always feels cold, even during the heatwave. […] The horseradish ointment smelled sharp, drowning out the fragrance of the flowers in the borders. I rubbed it into Marta's hands until it vanished under the skin, where its heat would melt the ice that was attacking her body.
> A cart full of manure came along the road. A man was walking alongside it, staring at us. For a while the smell of horseradish was mixed with the smell of dung.
> Later we drank some tea, which tasted of everything around us. (Tokarczuk 2003, 189)

We immediately understand that rheumatism is the cause of Marta's pain and chilliness. It would not be worth reading this episode several times to find out whether rheumatism is the real source of her symptoms. But if you are interested in the insights it contains, it is worth reading it several times and learning what it is like when rheumatism hurts someone's hands. What is it like to feel, look closely, and care for an old woman's hand? What is it like to invite to you neighbours in the countryside? What does a home remedy for rheumatism smell like? What is it made of, and how is it made? How is an event isolated, and how other events around it come into play in its happening? What is it like when smells are in the tastes? What is it like when something reminds us that it feels like... What comes to my mind now about intuition is that it is like tea, whose taste is the taste of everything that surrounds tea drinkers: it has an indivisible variety of flavours for which we have no words.

The secret of Tokarczuk's prose is not only that it juggles with words even when we have no words for something, which in itself would not be enough for literary writing. What grounds her narratives is that she is susceptible to much more than we have words for. In the time of writing, she goes far beyond words and far beyond reflection – through intuitions that, being refined also in their sensitivity to words, permeate the sentences she writes, as much as the familiar taste of tea is permeated by all that surrounds tea drinkers. The practice of writing is therefore not only about words and knowledge. It has as much to do with time, with the company of other creatures, with the eight worlds of the Cabalistic Game, with "the vast ladder of existences" (Tokarczuk 2010, 9). It is a kind of contact making through intuitions that emerge in the specific flavour of some specific event, which

we have to learn, as much as we have to learn Marta's old hand or the treatment of it not only with horseradish tincture but also with hands.

The problem with reflection is that it takes us out of this learning. If I start to pay attention to the tropes the text is working with, for example, I read without eyes, ears, nose, or taste buds, I only pay attention to my linguistic reflexes, and I give up grasping how the aroma of the tea is a flavour of everything that plays into the tea drinker's time. There is a different time for rhetorical reflection and a different time for the resonances of the writer's and reader's intuitions. Reflection is also valuable, but since it only helps us to get our bearings quickly and in accordance with our goals, it cannot replace intuitive knowledge. That is why it is not worth reflecting all the time as a reader or writer of literature instead of learning by intuition. Not only for the angel in the novel but also for the narrator and the reader can we apply all that distinguishes such an access:

> An angel doesn't have an intellect like the human one, it doesn't draw conclusions or make judgements. It doesn't think logically. To some people an angel would seem stupid. But from the start an angel carries within it the fruit of the tree of knowledge, pure wisdom that can only be enriched by simple intuition. It is a mind devoid of reasoning, and so devoid of mistakes and the fear they produce, an intellect without the prejudices that come from erroneous perception. But like all other things created by God, angels are volatile. That explains why Misia's angel was so often not there when she needed it. (Tokarczuk 2010, 9)

Nevertheless, even this "occasional," out-of-character compassion is a field of very intense encounters: "Then the angel's gaze and the human's gaze met for the first time, and the angel shuddered as only a bodiless angel can" (Tokarczuk 2010, 8).

Why is the disembodiment of the angel, the levitating dreamer, or the wanderer in other times (or in the other's time) always emphasized? If the absence of reflection eliminates the instantiation of the self, disembodiment prevents the appropriation of the other's time. For sympathy does not interiorize or embody the time of the other. If I am sympathetic towards the other, I am not in his/her place, I do not replace him/her/it, but I am in his/her/its company. This highly intense proximity is also disembodied because the contact is never in physical touch (ghosts cannot be touched) but in refined and intense attentional resonances. This is what makes it possible that by resonating with a soul encapsulated in a body the disembodied angel can shudder. And this is why sympathy freed from reflection becomes *mere* looking, gazing, seeing. However, sympathy cannot be free from its body, which is the reason why I spoke earlier about bodily visions. Vision without reflection is disembodied only in the sense that I cannot touch the

other person, but I still follow the events of his body bodily: I see with my hands, I see with my ears, I see with my feet, I see with my body what is happening. As we have said, there is no touch in resonance (this is what distinguishes this kind of relationship), but if I am a creature with a body, I resonate with the other by my own body.

Hence the apparent contradiction we read in the account of the dreamer who enters people as houses through their mouths: "I cannot sit down on the bed or pick up the comb in my hand. I'm disembodied, but I can see everything, and I can peep into every nook and cranny" (Tokarczuk 2003, 139). But three sentences later he continues, "[s]ometimes from the depths a distant, steady rumble reaches my *ears*, sometimes my *foot* slips on something hard and veiny" (Tokarczuk 2003, 139; emphases mine). The disembodied dreamer has not only eyes but also ears and feet. For his vision is inevitably an embodied vision. And this is not only the inconsistency of language. Rather, it is the revelation that speech is also embodied, as otherwise it would not help us to access experiences, and consequently it would be impossible to write and read literature. Speech is embodied not only in sounds and breaths but also in lavish gestures of attention – provided that we keep these attentional stimuli alive while writing and reading by following the (authorless) literary works of our language or, for that matter, by tuning into the experiments that take place within them.

Access always belongs both to the one who has access to something and to the one to whom/which he/she has access. Even if I access the other's time verbally or in thought, I do so in body and soul. If it were not so, there would be no temptation in the world and no desire because there would be no attraction or aversion to what is recalled in thought, word, and memory. Moreover, in all this, we share in some way with other living things: animals and plants. My dog in my childhood could be tempted, not only with his plate signalling good food but also with sounds, gestures, or different toys. We are not simply talking here about the Pavlovian conditioned reflex but rather about the sensitivity that allows conditioned reflexes to develop.

Bodily Visions and Other Rhythms

Those whose minds have lost some degree of rational and conventional orientation are just as susceptible to and subject to bodily visions as we all are in dreams that inhibit the functioning of consciousness. This is what makes Florentynka's resonances with her dogs so particularly intense. After she went mad, she "learned how to talk to her dogs and cats. The conversations relied on emitting images. What the animals imagined was not as concise and specific as human speech. It did not include thoughts, but it did have things seen from the

inside, without the human distance that brings a sense of alienation. It made the world seem more friendly" (Tokarczuk 2010, 35). Florentynka's experience is interesting not only for dogs but also for literary writing and reading because in them we must learn to escape from dominant ways of orienting in order to stalk such intuitions. Literary practices are less often called crazy by people than Florentynka (though there are some cases), but they are often called strange or incomprehensible. I accept that literature is incomprehensible. Because it is more to be seen than understood, and almost with everything that is not an eye.

If, for example, on a summer night one sleeps outside on the red iron bed in the courtyard, which is used for reading during the day (Tokarczuk 2003, 164), one can discover the possibilities of tuning one's visual orientation to the subtler lights, and what becomes untraceable due to the limitations of vision, one can try to follow by hearing: to see with one's ears, so to speak. "I began to do nothing but listen, for the first time in my life: the breathing became a purring, a whirring sound; I seemed to hear the sleepers' eyelids flapping together restlessly, and their hearts making a thumping sound that was heavier than air" (Tokarczuk 2003, 166). After everything turns into sound, the account concludes: "It should have been quiet as usual, but it wasn't – now I could hear the whiz of falling meteors and the blood-chilling roar of a comet" (Tokarczuk 2003, 166).

Primeval and Other Times does not follow the world war in strategic plans, political and economic processes, or precisely directed operations but in bodily visions, and always as someone's time – whether on the German, Russian, Slavic, or Jewish side. This is what we read of the Wehrmacht officer and his men: "In the spring of 1944 Kurt received an order to transfer everything to Kotuszów, one village further west, one village nearer home. It was said that the Bolsheviks were coming, though Kurt couldn't believe it. Then, once they had all their belongings packed on trucks, Kurt survived a Russian raid, when the German garrisons at Taszów were bombarded" (Tokarczuk 2010, 76). When Florentynka's dogs, panicked by the explosions, set upon the tyres of the retreating German trucks, "Kurt's soldiers started shooting. Kurt didn't try to stop them. It wasn't them shooting. It was their terror, in a foreign country, and their homesickness. It was their fear of death" (Tokarczuk 2010, 76). And it is this fear that fires the gun in Kurt's hands that kills Florentynka, who rushes to the defence of her dogs.

If we write or read *the time of Genowefa*, who witnessed the killing of the Jews of Jeszkotle, we look at someone's vision in the astonishing fear turning into paralysis. Not only do we see what she sees, but we see it through her, without physically taking her place:

> She raised a hand to her eyes because the setting sun was dazzling her, and only then did she see old Szlomo in an unbuttoned gabardine, the Gertzes' and Kindels' fair-haired children, Mrs Szenbert in a sky-blue dress, her

> daughter carrying a baby, and the little rabbi, who was being held up by the arms. And she saw Eli, as clear as day, holding his son by the hand. And then there was some confusion and the crowd broke through the line of soldiers. People started running in all directions, and those who were already in the trucks jumped out of them. From the corner of her eye Genowefa saw fire emerging from the barrels, then at once she was deafened by the thunder of multiple bursts of machine-gun fire. The figure of a man, from which she had not dropped her gaze, staggered and fell, just like others, like most of the others. […]
> Eli was lying nestled into the grass. For the first time in many years Genowefa saw him close up once more. She sat down beside him, and never stood on her own legs again. (Tokarczuk 2010, 78–79)

To meet times is not only to understand but to see with my intuition what the other sees with his/her intuition. And doing this I do not reflect on myself, that is, I do not reflect myself out of the other's time. To get rid of reflection is not simply to turn something off, which is practically impossible, but to tune into other times. With this paper, I would like to point out that in the research and teaching of literature, it is time to move from reflection and historicity to other times too. The notion of historicity directs attention to the historical contexts of dynamic processes, to the results of often simultaneous influences. Hence, even *histoire croisée* proposed by M. Werner and B. Zimmermann (2006) is limited to the rhythm of historical construction. In reading Tokarczuk, it is evident that there are other times that cannot be reduced to the temporality of construction. In the chapter on *The Time of the Orchard*, this difference can be traced as the time of the apple trees and the time of the pear trees, intertwined, repeatedly successive and yet with different rhythms:

> In the year of the apple, the trees draw from the earth the sour waters of underground rivers that have the power of change and motion. These waters contain the need to push, to grow and spread.
> The year of the pear is completely different. The time of the pear trees involves sucking sweet juices from the minerals, as inside the leaves they gently and gradually merge with the rays of the sun. The trees come to a stop in their growing and relish the sweetness of sheer existence, without moving, without developing. Then the orchard seems unchanging. (Tokarczuk 2010, 117–118)

Of course, this apparent unchangingness is also time, but it is a different temporality, one that is missed by the model of construction in the same way as if we were trying to capture the time of construction as a taste or sweetness of

mere existence. Change is as diverse as time itself. Its appropriation as historical construction follows processes of the type of development, but it obscures transformations such as the turning of the time of apple trees into the time of pear trees or changes of intensity within the time of pear trees. Our attempt to generalize the rhythms of transformation we like or chase is false, as in the *newness* paradigm, which makes transformations considered favourable a frame of reference against those considered unfavourable. In so doing, we reflect ourselves out of the time of life and of the significant stages of existence, and so we lose the experience of their temporality. It is in vain to reply that the preference for the new does not necessarily deny decay because the problem here is precisely that, according to the paradigm of newness, we regard all unfavourable transformations as decay, and thus we can only follow a kind of mirror rhythm of renewal in all of them.

But the *Tidying up the Attic* episode of *House of Day, House of Night* helps us to discover many exciting alternatives to such a simplistic transformation:

> It turned out that I hadn't worn many of the dresses at all – there had been no occasion to. They were hanging in the wardrobe, but they had still aged through the months of June, July, and August. I could see that they were wearing out, going at the seams, softening and getting older all by themselves without my input. And there was a sort of beauty in it, the opposite of ripening, a beauty that appears without anyone's help. Sandal leather goes black, softens and stretches, straps wear thin, buckles rust, the colour of a favourite blouse fades, or the sleeves of a shirt fray at the cuffs. (Tokarczuk 2003, 283)

While we wander in the temporalities of the many transformations of clothes and shoes, the *not new* discovery expands the margins of our temporal orientation. History looks like evolution: it goes from somewhere to somewhere, even if we do not attribute any design to it. Of course, in hindsight, we understand why things happened this or that way. We can see the direction in which forces of production developed, the main causes which led to world wars, the way modernization transformed life, how ideologies influenced communities, etc. This is not how we encounter time in Tokarczuk's novels. Unlike "histoire croisée," the evolution is not at stake here in the pursuit of new historical constructions; we are not trying to grasp the intersections of time as a system of relations, but we are literally (or rather practically) travelling through time ourselves, finding our passage between different temporalities. It makes a big difference if we endure and lament our own ageing as a decline, a monotonous returning from the coveted unfolding of new things, or we experience it as a temporality not at all devoid of beauty, not "new" but different from any previous experience of time. This expedition takes us not into the time of the other but rather into another time of our own transformation.

It is true that Paschalis, who lived centuries earlier, still hopes that writing will take him out of time into an unchanging world essentially attributed to God, but what happens to him and to his writing is an alternative rather than a realization of this immobility. We read in *Primeval and Other Times* that the unchanging character of God is a dubious presumption distancing people from the manifestations of God in time (Tokarczuk 2010, 71). Paschalis also struggled with times: "[h]e was hindered by the fact that the saint had lived long ago […] – so how was he to know what her world looked like? […] Was it just as he imagined? How was he to write about things he had never seen or experienced" (Tokarczuk 2003, 116)? By getting into the narrative, Paschalis finds out many interesting ways of doing this, which is why he is asked the same question by the prioress that Marta also asks: "'How do you know all this?' she asked him upon reading the first few pages. But there was a note of admiration in her voice" (Tokarczuk 2003, 116).

One of his discoveries was that, since we obviously cannot tell what we have never seen and never experienced, "he always saw Kummernis in familiar scenery, at this convent, in this courtyard […], in a habit just like the prioress's" (Tokarczuk 2003, 116). This is not an anachronism that can be charged as an error, falsifying the time of the other, but another opening to the mystery of the narrative knowledge that the prioress reader admires. "Kummernis went on living as long as he wrote about her as a living person, and she would never cease to exist, not even if he put her to death over and over again in his thoughts" (Tokarczuk 2003, 116–117). The other time, even if it is a distant past, can only be lived as now for one who tunes into it – hence the person whom we meet in that other time is also alive. Why should a reflexive relation to the past be preferred if not only its passing is evident but also the fact that the time called past also happened in the now for its former experiencers? Just as in the cabalistic play of the squire Popielski, who is trapped in the present (still alive) as a member of the past, we are confronted here with a chain of times and worlds opening out from one another as a vast chain of existences. Paschalis "realized that the aim of his writing was to reconcile all possible time scales, places and landscapes into one single image that would remain fixed, never ageing or changing" (Tokarczuk 2003, 117).

The same applies to the writing of *Primeval and Other Times* or *House of Day, House of Night*. But the only still image of the ladder of existences is also time: the moment of its capturing. And as such, even as an experience of wholeness, it can only be part of the vast ladder of existences. What is happening depends on what we are looking at: the single unchanging image or the reconciliation of all possible times. Historical orientation tends to glimpse the traces of long processes, the all-encompassing history or historicity of things, as a variant of the former. Literary practices, on the other hand, tend to experiment with the passages between multiple times. Note that the single still image is only the aim

of Paschalis's writing. Of course, all writers want to finish their books, while at the same time, like Paschalis, they find themselves – along with their readers – in a multiplicity of times and in attempts to find passages between them throughout the "whole" writing or reading process. Tokarczuk's novel is like the eight worlds of Popielski's play, built on or embedded in each other: Kummernis is writing, Paschalis is writing the life of Kummernis the writer, and Tokarczuk is writing the life of Paschalis the writer about a writer. But this time the stakes are not Borgesian metafiction, which makes us uncertain about what is fiction and what is reality.[10] What Kummernis writes, what Paschalis writes, and what Tokarczuk writes are all relevant to the ways and stakes of writing. Each of these notes is worth pondering or musing over as much as Marta's mysterious statements. And, above all, it is worth seeing what we can learn from them by tuning into their practices.

Concluding into Alternative Times

In the chapter entitled "The Nanny," the memoirist's record of the early childhood can also be understood as a diary of such time learning. The ability to look at oneself with a gaze outside oneself (the tiny child tries to see oneself through the lens of the first camera pointed at her) gradually erodes the permanence of the self and its position as an absolute centre. This change has paradoxically two opposite consequences. One is a loss:

> Each time I looked at the same things, I would see them differently. At first, I would get lost in it all, I'd be terrified, desperately searching for constancy. Finally, I'd realize that constancy really does exist, but way beyond my reach, while I'm like a stream, like the river in Nowa Ruda that keeps changing colour, and the only thing I can be sure of is that I'm flowing through a point in space and time, and I'm nothing more than the sum of the properties of that place and that time. (Tokarczuk 2003, 241)

This corresponds well to the concept of historical existence. But the exit from myself into other gazes and other times has another consequence, which is connected to the former as an addition or an encore, if you like: "The one advantage to emerge from this is that the world seen from a different viewpoint is a different world, so I can live in as many worlds as I am able to see" (Tokarczuk 2003, 241). The unreflective vision worked out in literary writing and reading, the intense now of bodily visions and the astonishing richness of the simple intuition help us to discover this advantage: in other times, I can encounter not only the outside of myself but also, again and again, another me.

10 See, for example, Jorge Luis Borges: *The Circular Ruins* (1946 [1940]).

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