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In Pursuit of Storytelling: A Conversation with Olga Tokarczuk, Nobel Laureate in Literature

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If Olga Tokarczuk's use of the word tenderness is cordiality, dignity and the quest for truth, then my interview with her exemplified exactly that. I talked to Olga Tokarczuk in the privacy of the diocesan museum, inspired by the souls of the past and surrounded by sculptures of the Madonna.

I wanted to know how the author created her world in words, how she described small gestures, posture, or objects. Olga Tokarczuk has said that we lack the language to describe a world which is changing. Linguistic expressions and the range of existing metaphors are too limited to accommodate the sensual and visual richness of the world.

Olga Tokarczuk compared writing a novel to telling oneself fairy-tales from an adult perspective. She wasn't totally happy with the metaphor, but what she meant was that crafting a story entails mirroring the world while adding your fantasy to it. For Olga Tokarczuk, writing starts in the head, where images are formed. It's where the author reveals herself in the personality of the characters she creates and which has infinite potential. This reflects the fact that we do not have one personality; we have many. Our social personality is a kind of masked, limited personality, a kind of agent sent out to communicate with the world. However, even when authors draw on themselves for their characterisation, they never entirely reveal who they are.

Olga Tokarczuk explained that for her, travelling is a way of being free, an idea which goes back centuries and which lies somewhere deep in our psyche. This is a flux, a little rebellion which produces a kind of disturbance in the mind; brings out new sensations, a refusal to accept the status quo. Moving geographically, changing contexts is a leitmotif of her writing. As she puts it in *Flights*, "Whoever stops will be petrified; whoever pauses will be pinned down like an insect." For Olga Tokarczuk, this is the best way to live the challenges the modern world asks of us. It is not easy as we are subject to so many different influences. One area of influence, which she mentioned, is the fact that we are consumers. As we easily become slaves to a wide range of material things this is an area of life in which we can be manipulated.

Olga Tokarczuk is not a naive dreamer, she realises that we cannot imagine a society that would simply throw these materialistic considerations in the air. Her novel *Flights* appeals to people to value what they have. But living in this world has also a mental aspect. It is a mental journey in which we need to free ourselves from the various material apparatuses, mechanisms, and influences to which we are subjected. Freedom is difficult to describe; it is an intoxicating awareness of your potential and direction. It is a continuum:

at one end we have safety, love, family, and job security and at the other, the unknown. We are all situated somewhere on this continuum; some people would give anything for a sense of security because, for example, they did not feel it in their childhood, while others decide to travel and in doing so, deprive themselves of this sense of security. However, Olga Tokarczuk assures us that once we have started to explore our freedom in the world, this journey continues and gets easier.

All of this made me think, “Who would be more valued in our society: Kłoska, who lives in the forest, or arrogant Ukleja?” For Olga Tokarczuk, haughty Ukleja is a character who would be more appreciated today. The world’s media doesn’t line up in front of the house to report on a woman giving birth or someone who lives in the forest and picks berries, but they would for someone like the character of Ukleja. She laments that business people and people high up in the power hierarchy are presented as people to envy and examples to follow. As she sees it, the task of a writer is to describe people from different layers of reality, including those from the periphery of experience. This is why in her novels, there is always someone who cannot integrate into this type of social power structure and does not know how to deal with such a system. For Olga Tokarczuk, the most interesting stories always come from the periphery. She quotes Piłsudski¹ who observed long ago that Poland is like a bagel: there is a void in the middle while the periphery is made up of the best pastry. This also applies, in a sense, to topics related to writing; what is currently being discussed, what is in the media, for Olga Tokarczuk, is not writing material. That is why she does not reference contemporary history or take a position on contemporary issues. She penetrates history and social phenomena from a different angle, as she says, from the kitchen, trying to see what is interesting from this perspective.

¹ Józef Piłsudski was a Polish statesman who served as the Chief of State (1918–1922) and First Marshal of Poland (from 1920). After World War I, he was an active player in Polish politics and international diplomacy. He is considered a father of the Second Polish Republic re-established in 1918, 123 years after the final Partition of Poland in 1795.

This is how I remember my conversation with Olga Tokarczuk from which I took away an invaluable feeling of being motivated; motivated to live life unfettered, free, eager to break out of a stifled existence; to live creatively and boldly.

**Edited and translated by Iga M. Lehman
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