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Rethinking Collective Story: Olga Tokarczuk's Tender Narrator and Spatiotemporal Entanglement¹

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Abstract – This article introduces the characterisation of the ‘tender narrator’ elaborated by the Polish writer Olga Tokarczuk. The new narrative instance proposed in the Nobel Prize lecture (2019) turns out to be not just a we-narrator model but a post-anthropocentric one. In order to analyse it, the paper proposes to distinguish three key elements of Tokarczuk’s project: the connection of diegetic forms with the environmental crisis of the Anthropocene; the changing, ‘fragmented’ collective and individual perspectives; and the titular narrative tenderness as a form of sensitivity linking humankind to more-than-human voices, highlighting their networks and relations. This idea seems correlated to the repertoire of econarratological research and, more broadly, non-anthropocentric narrative theories. This article aims to problematise spatiotemporal experiences in Tokarczuk’s novel *The Empusium: A Health Resort Horror Story* (2024) in order to detail the manifestations of the fourth-person narrator, namely ‘tender narrator’. In analysing how representations of time and space are mediated in the tender story, aspects such as interdependencies, despatialisation and fragmentation of perspectives are brought to the fore.

Keywords – Olga Tokarczuk; Tender Narrator; *The Empusium*; Econarratology; Anthropocene.

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1. Searching for the Tender Narrator

“Could there be a story that would go beyond the uncommunicative prison of one’s own self, revealing a greater range of reality and showing the mutual connections? That would be able to keep its distance from the well-trodden, obvious and unoriginal center point of commonly shared opinions, and manage to look at things ex-centrally, away from the center?” (*The Tender Narrator* 20). These questions, posed during the Nobel speech by the Polish writer Olga Tokarczuk, can be regarded as a signpost for the gradual conceptualisation of the ‘tender narrator’. The writer’s reflections begin with a few autobiographical experiences from her childhood and memories of her mother, moving, therefore, from an intimate detailed telling to global problems characteristic of the Anthropocene (Crutzen and Stoermer). The ‘tender narrator’, located ex-centrally and simultaneously close to the character and at the very core of the storyworld, is supposed to have a similar poetics to the way of writing in the author’s essay.

Tender narrator — Olga Tokarczuk’s ideological and aesthetic proposal, on which I would like to shed light in this article — did not suddenly appear in 2019 during her lecture at the Swedish Academy. Fourth-person narrator, which Tokarczuk uses synonymously with the term tender narrator, grows out of her earlier works. However, this does not mean that the project directly named in the Nobel lecture has been finalised as the author herself emphasises: “No doubt a genius will soon appear, capable of constructing an entirely different, as yet unimaginable narrative in which everything essential will be accommodated” (23). The concept I will try to illustrate in this article is fragmented by nature and could appear internally contradictory as it is by definition. We can catch hints of the fourth-person point of view in texts published long before the author’s Nobel lecture, like *Primeval and Other Times* (1996) and *House of Days, House of Nights* (1998), books from the beginning of her career. In the latest publications as well, such as the collection of short stories *Opowiadania bizarne* (2018) or the novel *The Empusium: A Health Resort Horror Story* (2024), the author has explored this mode of narration. Fragmentation and despatialisation, which translate into a more-than-human collective perspective, a holistic approach to reality, seem to constitute the poetics of Tokarczuk’s writing (Kantner 54). The tender narrator who is above time, above place, and simultaneously has an intimate relationship with specific agents does not stand exclusively for an individual voice. In Tokarczuk’s works, the ‘tenderness’ is not a mere writing practice, but also a means of An-thropocene fiction (Trexler), which other authors use to explore themes and narrative possibilities to represent the crisis of the environment, uncer-

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tain climate futures, human-non-human relations, and the so-called 'technonature'.² My purpose is ultimately to show how this understanding of the 'tender narrator' is a signal of the urgent need for a new narrator to reflect on the unstable epoch of the Anthropocene.

The Nobel Prize laureate's postulate to create an alternative narrative strategy is addressed to readers, writers and, as it seems, researchers of literary theory. By calling for the invention of a post-anthropocentric fourth-person narrative, Tokarczuk undoubtedly enters the vast trend of ecological humanities,³ pointing to the correlation between the condition of the natural environment and contemporary narrative practices, especially stories told from within the Anthropocene: "The climate emergency and the political crisis in which we are now trying to find our way, and which we are anxious to oppose by saving the world have not come out of nowhere. [...] That is why I believe I must tell stories as if the world were a living, single entity, constantly forming before our eyes, and as if we were a small and at the same time powerful part of it" (*The Tender Narrator* 25). These words recall Lawrence Buell's theories, the pioneer ecocriticism, according to whom "environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination, the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imaging nature and humanity's relation to it" (2). Crises with seemingly different causes have numerous common and mutually linked points. Understanding and then confronting the challenges that the Anthropocene poses to us depends today on the post-anthropocentric development or deconstruction of existing concepts, especially concerning narratives, that focus on humans (Fiedorczuk 13). Such nature writing categories that particularly go beyond human frameworks are undoubtedly deep geological time, integrated and multiplied temporalities, as well as despatialised space. All these diegetic traces can be found in the tender narrator project.

Most Polish philologists and literary scholars examining Tokarczuk's writing⁴ connect the category of 'tenderness' with the engaged self (Taylor) and care understood in feminist (Gilligan, Noddings) or posthumanist (DeFalco) theories. The aim of the article is a preliminary attempt to define the characteristics of the tender narrator as a project of econarratology, unnatural narratology, ecopoetics, and empathic narratives. The narratological reception, seemingly evident in this context, appeared only on the margins of previous academic analyses of Tokarczuk's concept. The tender narrator seems to be central to the vivid recent debates in contemporary postclassical narratology. In this respect, I would like to take under consideration the reception of Tokarczuk's idea of tenderness but, in particular, I intend to examine the role of time and space in the "ex-central" mode of storytelling proposed by the Nobel Prize laureate. Through this essential spatiotemporal dynamic, the narrator provides further insight into the levels of entanglement of reality. This article claims to analyse the close connection between the narrative techniques used by Olga Tokarczuk and the beyond-human reality in its various forms, from the non-human perspective of fungi, plants or animals to unstable networks and agents of incredibly extended finitude. According to Adam Trexler, the climate crisis or wider, the Anthropocene, is not just a literary "theme", instead, "it remakes basic narrative operations" (233). Narrative tenderness would be synonymous with entanglement, both intra-textual of space-time-actors-narrator-events, and extra-textual, expressed in the inclusion of non-human forms in the literary text. My examples of the diversity of spatiotemporal transformations in the fourth-person or tender experience come from Tokarczuk's latest novel *The Empusium*.

² The impact of technological-natural assemblages (using the example of insects and their non-human ways of self-organisation) in transmedial narratives is analysed in detail in Piekutowski.

³ On the characteristics of the ecological humanities, i.e. specification of features, history and internal divisions, see Domańska.

⁴ By means of example, see Świerkosz; Kantner; Choraży.

2. Key Elements of Fourth-Person Point of View

To illustrate Olga Tokarczuk's concept, we should first extract from her meandering essay the recurring elements or keywords around which she builds further senses. On the one hand, such an inductive reading of *The Tender Narrator* will allow us to get closer to the meaning(s) of the text. On the other hand, it will also function as an implementation of the poetics elaborately drawn by the author. This new form of telling appears semantically related to the three categories: environmental and narrative crisis, dynamic perspectives, and titular tenderness. These themes interpenetrate and complement each other, but their further distinction will allow for a more detailed categorising of Tokarczuk's concept.

2.1 Wor(l)d Crisis

As I indicated in the introduction, Tokarczuk sees a contemporary crisis of narrative forms (and, more broadly, of literature itself), which seems to be essentially perceived as one of the components of the climate and environment catastrophe, which is ground zero for the tender narrator perspective:

Today our problem lies — it seems — in the fact that we do not yet have ready narratives not only for the future, but even for a concrete now, for the ultra-rapid transformations of today's world. We lack the language, we lack the points of view, the metaphors, the myths and new fables. Yet we do see frequent attempts to harness rusty, anachronistic narratives that cannot fit the future to imaginaries of the future, [...]. In a word, we lack new ways of telling the story of the world. (*The Tender Narrator* 3)

In line with this thought, the story must reformulate its logocentric and therefore anthropocentric foundations to create a new narrative sensitivity to the entanglement of the networked more-than-human world. That is why Tokarczuk — not only in the Nobel lecture but also in other passages from the collection of essays *Czuję narrator* (2020) — repeatedly argues: “Let us create a library of new concepts” (“Ognoza” 29). With all its effects, global warming exposes the weakness of our language: the incompatibility of human-centred forms and terminology to alternative non-anthropocentric storytelling, “the deconstruction of logocentrism is a way to start finding the exit route” (Morton 51). Econarratology — a sub-discipline theorised by Erin James — values the literary form besides the message in the environmentally engaged fiction: “A heightened sensitivity to form will help ecocritics analyze better imaginations of physical environments that may not be immediately recognizable to readers and scholars” (*The Storyworld Accord* 26). This kind of more-than-human story would be “rooted in nature,” as Tokarczuk emphasises (*The Tender Narrator* 20). However, from today's ecological perspective, the naturalness or materiality of such a story would mean its instability and liquidity. The models of Anthropocene narrative should constantly adapt to the dynamically modifying patterns of nature, as Marco Caracciolo argues (*Narrating the Mesh* 4), and thus be open to what Elizabeth DeLoughrey calls the signs of interspecies worlding (360–3).

However, before Tokarczuk comes to her literary strategy to face the crisis, she directs the reader's attention to changes in the dominant perspective and narrative situation. According to the writer, movements within Franz K. Stanzel's typological circle (between auctorial, personal/figural, and first-person narrative situations) (Stanzel) played an essential role in what we could call the process of de-magicalisation (disenchantment) of the world (Weber) on the one hand and hyper-separation (Plumwood) on the other. As Tokarczuk claims, we have irreversibly lost the ability to collectively narrativise experience mediated by myth by

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switching to the first-person narrator: “We live in a reality of polyphonic first-person narratives, and we are met from all sides with polyphonic noise” (*The Tender Narrator* 3). According to the Nobel laureate, by focusing on the individual experience we have created today’s information noise, which has replaced a universal and community-based story (9). Walter Benjamin described a similar mechanism in a different context of the Great War in the famous text from *The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov* (1936). In her essay, Tokarczuk points out both the possibilities and limitations of these two different narrator perspectives. At the same time, Tokarczuk tries to abandon nostalgic valuations of the third-person narrator and emphasises the impossibility of mortal actors showing their actual agency in mythical tales. The agency was therefore regained through the first-person perspective close to the character, and Tokarczuk also credits this shift with a significant contribution to shaping narrative empathy (4–5): “By reading [first-person stories], we are participating in someone else’s life and becoming the other. We see through their eyes, perceive the world through their senses, and think like a character that trails us away” (“Palec w soli” 100).

2.2 Dynamic Perspectives

From the analysed speech, we can understand that the I-narrative impacted the end of ‘grand narratives’ (Lyotard), replacing hegemonic singular history with a multiplicity of individual microhistories (Levi). However, nowadays, when the determinant of the narrative, be that a new grand actor/threat/goal, seems to be an ecological catastrophe⁵, there is a need for the return of an omniscient third-person narrator on a large scale but enriched with an alternative fourth-person point of view, not to turn away from the first-person empathetic potential: “Perhaps we should trust fragments, as it is fragments that create constellations capable of describing more, and in a more complex way, multi-dimensionally” (*The Tender Narrator* 22). As stated in the quotation, the fourth-person point of view project is based on emphasising a fragment in which the storyteller will be able to summarise a complete experience. The disintegration of the world by overlapping space-time and communication layers is an irreversible effect (15–7). However, the aim of the tender narrator is not to deny this current state of affairs and a retrotopic return to the mythical paradigm with the omniscient narrator. Instead, it is intended to use fragmentation and narrative discontinuities “to uncover hidden links and dependencies in the narrated/seen world. Thus, it functions as a constant longing for the story’s completeness, which, pursuing the whole understood as an aversion to the exclusionary selection, would be combined with narrative methods to inspect what is partial” (Łebkowska 380).

Pluralisation is a vital feature in transdisciplinary research on the Anthropocene (James, *Narrative in the Anthropocene* 120; Mentz). In Tokarczuk’s concept, this multiplication of voices and viewpoints is always uncertain because it invalidates the possibility of one objective story but takes the form of a fourth-person, dynamically changing perspective. Which, in turn,

⁵ By combining the Anthropocene narratives with Lyotard’s grand narratives, I aim to describe a new dominant story of assemblages that considers the vast interdependencies of a new a geologic period. This is an inclusive narrative, directed to different places and told from different non-anthropocentric perspectives. At the same time, following Marco Caracciolo, it should be noted that an entirely different grand narrative of the Anthropocene is currently functioning. Caracciolo calls it the ‘Anthropocene protonarrative,’ which strengthens the conviction of the exceptionality of humans: “Read in this light, the Anthropocene becomes a planetary coming-of-age story that culminates, according to Crutzen, in ‘scientists and engineers’ taking charge and steering humanity toward ‘environmentally sustainable management’” (“Storying the Anthropocene” 544).

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may but does not have to be equivalent to the first person plural, or we-narrative. As Tokarczuk states: “I also dream of a new kind of narrator—a ‘fourth-person’ one, who is not merely a grammatical construct of course, but who manages to encompass the perspective of each of the characters, as well as having the capacity to step beyond the horizon of each of them, who sees more and has a wider view, and who is able to ignore time” (*The Tender Narrator* 21). More important than the specific grammatical person of the narrative instance is its relationality in coordinating multiple, variable perspectives.

The fourth-person perspective would move in four dimensions⁶, increasing or eliminating the distance between the subject of the narration and the actors depending on the situation. Similar shifts occur in focalisation. The we-narrator presenting events seems to play with all three types of focalisation, as distinguished by Gérard Genette: zero, internal, and external (185–211). In other words, the position from which tender narrator will continue its story is uncertain; the spatiotemporal stance and level of involvement in narrative events are constantly in movement: “Who is narrating – this problem frequently returns the writer’s work and usually corresponds to the question of who, and from which place is watching” (378), notes Polish narratologist Anna Łebkowska. The tender narrator inhibits the unambiguity of projection and identification in the story — modifies the collective point of view from a global to a local perspective, speaks on behalf of the more-than-human community, and, if necessary, adopts the limited point of view of a person or its autonomous fragments (body parts, things, microorganisms, affects). The dynamics and uncertainty of the narrator’s states are often part of conflated temporality, in which, by simplifying, actions taking place at one time influence events in a different temporal level, collapsing the precise boundary between the past and the present (Richardson 50–1).

2.3 Narrative Tenderness

As Łebkowska notes, although literary scholars have usually read Tokarczuk’s fiction in several categories: empathy, care, locality, and tenderness, it was this last theme that dominated the analyses undertaken after she received the Nobel Prize in Literature (369). How, then, does tenderness manifest itself as one of the determinants of the fourth-person perspective? Opening the last, seventh section of the essay, Tokarczuk returns to this issue in self-reflection on her creative process:

When I write, I have to feel everything inside myself. I have to let all the living beings and objects that appear in the book go through me, everything that is human and beyond human, everything that is living and not endowed with life. I have to take a close look at each thing and person, with the greatest solemnity, and personify them inside myself, personalize them. That is what tenderness serves me for — because tenderness is the art of personifying, of sharing feelings, and thus endlessly discovering similarities. Creating stories means constantly bringing things to life, giving an existence to all the tiny pieces of the world that are represented by human experiences, the situations people have endured and their memories. Tenderness personalizes everything to which it relates, making it possible to give it a voice, to give it the space and the time to come into existence, and to be expressed. It is thanks to tenderness that the teapot starts to talk (23–4).

Narrative tenderness would determine a specific sensitivity to detecting and then focalising interdependencies between actors, including those separated in time and space: “Tenderness perceives the bonds that connect us, the similarities and sameness between us” (24). It

⁶ Three space dimensions and one time dimension.

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is not just a form of care or empathy, “the most modest form of love” (24), as the author affirms,⁷ but it should also be understood as narrative attention to stimuli (voices and actions) coming from storyworld. At this point in the translations of the essay expose a significant semantic discrepancy, which is ultimately widened by, among other things, specifying the collocation of the verb ‘tend’, which is the base for the adjective ‘tender’ and the noun ‘tenderness’: “Therefore, while the Polish word [czuły] activates the domain of the senses, corresponding to feeling, the English one [tender]—the domains of care, help, presence and mindfulness” (Glaz 275). To illustrate the sensory function of tenderness, Tokarczuk builds technological references to the photography medium (recurring picture of the mother from the first paragraph) and the radio network: “the antennae’s feelers stumbled onto black holes. [...] I believed that through this radio different solar systems and galaxies were speaking to me, crackling and warbling and sending me important information, and yet I was unable to decipher it” (*The Tender Narrator* 1). According to the author, a sensitive camera lens could convey narrative tenderness; the focaliser of the text would encompass the entire storyworld like an auctorial narrator while constantly focusing on subsequent actors or interconnections that the reader could experience in previously unknown configurations or as an integral part of these connections through the we-narrative. Moreover, tenderness would enable the modification of existential scopes: if necessary, the narrator would expose the conventionality of distance, becoming a first-person or personal narrator.

In the article *The Storied Lives of Non-Human Narrators*, which directed the discussion in the field of non-anthropocentric narratology, the authors, namely Lars Bernaerts, Marco Caracciolo and others, shed light on the types of non-human narrators, their different functions, manifestations in specific genres, and the formal devices used. Following the researchers, the definitions of these classifications can be considered on the line stretched between the play of similarities and otherness: “Non-human narrators often seem to echo this dialectic of defamiliarisation and empathy. They implicitly and explicitly foreground strategies of distancing and identification” (Bernaerts, Caracciolo, Herman and Vervaeck 73–4). For these reasons, a sensitive narrator who moves between these strategies and even adopts the perception of human characters is never fully human, despite defamiliarising, fragmenting, or collectivising procedures. All the more so, its external gaze, despite being ‘above the world’, is not identical to the disembodied narrative of the “brain-in-a-vat”—produced by the modernity figure of the objective scientist looking externally at nature (Latour 4). In a tender narrative, as in the it-narratives examined by Alessio Mattana, the distinction between the subject and the object of observation, which Bruno Latour mentions in *Pandora’s Hope* (2000), is made difficult or even impossible because “conventional epistemic hierarchies are subverted” (Mattana 83).

Tokarczuk states that tenderness “is a way of looking that shows the world as being alive, living, interconnected, cooperating with, and codependent on itself” (*The Tender Narrator* 24). The tenderness of the omniscient narrator would determine its transition from uninvolved and distancing exteriority to entanglement in ex-centricity. In other words, the act of watching important for the writer “goes far beyond empathetic fellow feeling” (*The Tender Narrator* 24), being thus understood differently than in Michel Foucault’s analyses (*Discipline and Punish*) or as “[m]astering, looking from above, dividing up and controlling is an approach to space that ignores time as well as the density of its lived-in quality” (151) described by Mieke Bal. Once again, thanks to both defamiliarising techniques that undermine what the reader

⁷ The tenderness linked to love in Tokarczuk’s project grows into a religious category or at least can be included in the post-secular condition. To showcase this significance, the writer composes the seventh segment of *The Tender Narrator* on the scheme known from *the First Epistle to the Corinthians* concerning the enumeration of the attributes of love (13:1–13).

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considers “natural” (Bernaerts, Caracciolo, Herman and Vervaeck 73) and the two strategies of empathising (insider perspective and outsider perspective) distinguished by Alexa Weik von Mossner (86–104), the more-than-human narrative tenderness of the fourth-person narrator is formed.

In order to outline possible uses of tender narrator, the next segment will signal its close connection with the spatiotemporal level of a story. For this purpose, I will discuss exemplifications from Tokarczuk’s latest novel *The Empusium*.

3. Tokarczuk’s *The Empusium*: When and Where Are We?

Time and space—these two diegetic categories have been fundamental for researchers of narrative theory since the very beginning of the development of the discipline in the 20th century, i.e. in the structural-generative phase. Even today, for example, in the cognitivist perspective, the time-space dimension of the story assumes the proportions of one of the critical requirements of narrative and mental action through text (Easterlin 192–194; Dannenberg 6). Adopting the fourth-person perspective of the tender narrator causes a move away from the human being as the central point of reference for the narrativisation of the spatiotemporal experience, as a result of which linear and natural diegetic forms lose their significance. The issue of limitations and possibilities of knowing through narrative the destabilised space and time of the Anthropocene epoch is an essential component of the latest non-anthropocentric turn in narratology (James 93–144). Referring to Erin James’s research in *Narrative in the Anthropocene* (2022), unnatural spatialisation or the merged and multiplied temporalities of non-human narratives should not necessarily be classified by us as unequivocally anti-mimetic. Jan Alber, in turn, associates the sense of odd in dealing with this type of fiction with “the occurring of physically or logically impossible time lines within realist frameworks,” (188) that, paradoxically, in today’s strange epoch may turn out to be more “mimetic” than we think. Speaking from within the Anthropocene, the position from which the tender narrator tells the story is ambiguous and yet so familiar to us.

Examples of such perspectives fill *The Empusium* because, following “Tokarczuk’s point, the manifestation of a non-human mode of perception is usually founded on the invention of a specific way of experiencing time and space” (Kantner 101). The fragmentation of space and actors through the narrator’s non-human point of view can be experienced already in the description that opens the novel and introduces the setting of Görbersdorf — a health resort for patients suffering from tuberculosis, located in Lower Silesia:

To see everything we must look beneath them, let ourselves be momentarily blinded by the grey haze, until the vision that emerges after this trial run is sharp, incisive and all-seeing. Then we shall catch sight of the platform flagstones, squares overgrown with the stalks of feeble little plants – a space trying at any cost to keep order and symmetry. Soon after, a left shoe appears on them, brown, leather, not brand new, and is immediately joined by a second, right shoe; this one looks even shabbier – its toe is rather scuffed, and there are some lighter patches on the upper. For a moment the shoes stand still, indecisively, but then the left one advances. This movement briefly exposes a black cotton sock beneath a trouser leg. Black recurs in the tails of an unbuttoned wool coat; the day is warm. A small hand, pale and bloodless, holds a brown leather suitcase; the weight has caused the veins to tense, and now they indicate their source, somewhere deep inside the bowels of the sleeve. Under the coat we glimpse a flannel jacket of rather poor quality, slightly crumpled by the long journey and marked by tiny bright dots of some nonspecific impurity – the world’s chaff. (15)

The world of *The Empusium* seems to be split into fragments scattered randomly; the tender narrator “doggedly gathers up all the tiny pieces in an attempt to stick them together

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again to create a universal whole” (*The Tender Narrator* 17). Paving slabs, weeds, components of the human body, clothes, specks of dust — all of them function in apparent separation and thus enter into unknown entanglements with each other. What I call fragmentation can be classified as a defamiliarising technique. The tender narrator is not a teleological cartographer; it forces the recipient of the plot to actively connect the network elements from which liquid constellations emerge following already existent connections. Elsewhere in the novel, we read: “how thoughts arise and what they are like — they are wisps of sensations carried by time like gossamer, moved by the wind, trails of tiny reactions that arrange themselves into random sequences eager for meaning” (133). Although the tender narrator in *The Empusium* diverges from assumptions of network narratives (Bordwell 189–252), it shares certain standard features with them, most notably the emphasised interdependencies analysed by Caracciolo (37–42). Entanglement of the storyworld in Tokarczuk’s text is achieved by fragmentation of both the montane setting and the characters. Some of the actors in the novel are never presented in their entirety, such as Klara Opitz, the wife of the owner of the health resort, who dies at the beginning of the plot: “and from hands that appear briefly in the doorway receives a mug of hot, tasty broth” (*The Empusium* 20). The protagonist, Mieczysław Wojnicz, a student from Lviv, trying to describe the profile of the deceased Klara to the police, confesses solely: “I saw bits of her. You see, sir, in that short time she was always on the move, and I saw either a hand holding a tray or a shoe holding the door open” (86).

A fragmentary look of the we-narrator, which notices and highlights non-obvious connections between different elements of reality, allows us to see what is inaccessible to the human eye:

Our eyes penetrate deep inside. We can see the skeleton [Wojnicz’s], the beating heart, the peristalsis of the intestines, the oesophagus working away as it endeavours to push down the saliva that has gathered out of fear. We can see the tongue, arranging itself to utter some word. The diaphragm rises and falls, drops of urine flow from the kidneys to the bladder. The uterus clenches like a fist, but the member swells with blood. (317)

The entanglement of bodies and spaces progresses. The women, practically absent from Görbersdorf, are replaced by Tuntschi’s female plant-mushroom sculptures growing from the forest floor. In turn, Wojnicz, who proves to be an intersex person, gradually becomes entangled in the narrative by embodying the identity of the dead Klara Opitz: “A small, cracked mirror above the washbasin reflected his body divided into pieces, as if this image were part of a larger jigsaw puzzle [...]. He felt plural, multiple, multifaceted, compound and complicated like a coral reef, like a mushroom spawn whose actual existence is located underground” (329).

At the moment of the protagonist’s transformation, the existence of a separate Klara Opitz and a separate Mieczysław Wojnicz becomes doubtful, and the chronology of events seems unreliable. Or rather, the tender narrator, through defamiliarisation, cannot present the subjectivity of an individual being but of a dividual character in sensitivity to the flows of matter from the external environment. According to Jane Bennett: “Dividuals, as selves and as (even more) complex assemblages, ride but also tilt and deform outside influences; they are pushed by and pluckily deflect atmospheric trajectories; they inhale charismatic milieux and repeat them with a twist” (117). Entanglement in the narrative also occurs as an effect of overlapping temporal perspectives. Following Erin James’s theory, this can be called ‘despatialisation’, a term proposed as a radicalisation of David Herman’s category of ‘fuzzy temporality’ (*Story Logic* 214–220). In James’s thought, despatialisation is a moment in the story that represents several parallel (sometimes contradictory) realities or “focuses attention on spatializing cues that make it challenging for readers to conceive of spaces as fixed and moored” (*Narrative in the Anthropocene* 122). Similarly, narrative tenderness would allow the

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readers to see beyond their present time, to be in multiple places and times, an experience which Tokarczuk explains in her essay *Ognozia* using an anonymous woodcut from astronomer Camille Flammarion's work *L'Atmosphère: Météorologie Populaire* (1888). Tenderness would, therefore, be the attitude of the wayfarer from the well-known illustration, whose head is immersed in a cosmic experience, leaning above the firmament, while the rest of his body is on the ground ("Ognozia" 5–6). This strategy can be observed in the novel in the following passage: "his plate was standing in the exact spot where the proprietor's wife's leg had been lying. Rolls of fabric, a stocking, skin, muscles..." (*The Empusium* 53). Tokarczuk questions the superficial appearance of the world, which is characteristic of her fiction (Barcz 261–262). Spaces, along with events and actors from different temporal planes, overlap in the story. They exist in a parallel, in an entanglement. Despatialisation seems to be closely connected to the narrator's more-than-human geological perspective: "though there is probably no place where no one has ever died – the world has existed for long enough by now" (*The Empusium* 67).

In *The Empusium*, fragments of bodies, the natural environment, and objects tell their own stories, complementing each other. They constitute the narrator's polyphony. Under the assumptions of tender narration, the perspective is dynamic and variable, and the narrator is both homo- and heterodiegetic. Thus, the key question that accompanies the reader, and to which there is no clear answer, is, who is the collective narrator of the novel? Is the changing, omnipresent "we" embodied? The collective observer who encompasses everything remains hypothetical (Herman, "Hypothetical Focalization") in most of Tokarczuk's novels, but they are made specific at particular moments in the story. Even despite their omniscience, the collective reveal themselves as one of the actors: "And now we shall leave them here, debating around a table covered with an ominously patterned cloth, we shall leave them, to vacate the house via the chimney or the chinks between the slate roof tiles – and then gaze from afar, from above" (59). The narrator-character is ephemeral, an unstable subject/entity permeating space under the predispositions of the fourth-person narrator to dynamic change of perspective. They physically move upwards to obtain a total viewpoint; they penetrate the characters and take over their point of view: "What the icon depicts is best viewed through the eyes of Wojnicz" (141); or finally, they tell the story from a micro-perspective: "Here we are watching them, as usual from below, [...]. Their feet mechanically crush the forest litter, snap the small plants, tear up the moss, and squash the tiny bodies of insects [...]. For a short while after they pass, beneath the forest floor the mushroom spawn quivers, that vast, immense, motherly structure transmits information to itself – where the intruders are, and in which direction they are bending their steps" (125–6). "We", in the case of the tender narrator, does not necessarily have to entail the need of defining "they" due to the fluidity of the collective framework. The more-than-human identity of the narrator-character stays uncertain. On the one hand, mysterious 'they' who are the narrative instance in the novel are the numerous generations of women united with nature and marginalised by patriarchy; on the other hand, the narrator is sym-poietic organisation embodied in the form of mycelium system, characteristic in Tokarczuk's work (Ubertowska 317–21), particularly in the case of *The Empusium*, entwining the planet and thus forming a mesh with other agents on an enormous spatiotemporal scale.

"I am a creature of the mud, not the sky"(3) writes Donna Haraway, and it is in this posthumanist stance that Olga Tokarczuk's narrative project should be read. The fourth-person perspective would attempt to convey the extent of interdependence in today's world and, simultaneously, focus the optics on a single fragment, a frozen fragment of now. The Nobel Prize laureate project seems to be, by definition, impossible to categorise unequivocally, sometimes becoming a strange experiment in line with the strangeness of the Anthropocene: "Indeed, our reality has already become surreal"(23), Tokarczuk notes in her lecture.

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The formal realisation (including the time-space realisation) of the tender story already in *Primeval and Other Times* or *The Books of Jacob* takes a different structure than in *The Empusium*. For example, in the case of *The Books of Jacob*, alongside the first-person and third-person narrators, there is the fourth-person narrator, who is paradoxically an individual human character — Jenta. Her perspective consolidates not only actors, events, and historical or biological processes distant in time and space but also reaches beyond the text and the act of writing itself, deconstructing them, as it were. As Tokarczuk admits: “when I found myself in her field of view, it gave me the shivers” (“Wykłady łódzkie” 178). Nevertheless, the fourth-person narrator still flows from the three categories: crisis, dynamic perspective, and tenderness, which are distinguished in the article. Therefore, further research should investigate the representation of the tender narrator in previous works by Tokarczuk and examine this narrative model in other contemporary authors oriented on more-than-human perspectives. This means Tokarczuk’s concept is still a work in progress, and its theoretical elaborations remain open.

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