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## All that jazz. Early reactions to the Nobel Prize in Literature awarded to Olga Tokarczuk

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**Abstract:** The paper discusses selected reactions to the Nobel Prize for Literature awarded to Olga Tokarczuk. The author focuses on the dispute about the legitimacy and justification of the Swedish Academy's decision, highlighting the sceptical opinions, in some cases challenging the Academy's members' verdict. Referring to a book by James F. English on cultural prizes, the author recalls the role of public controversies as an essential tool of influencing the general public. He also compares the situation of two winners of the Nobel Prize in Literature (Olga Tokarczuk – for 2018, Peter Handke – for 2019), announced on the same day. Concluding, the author seeks to present the most important aspects of the dispute on the position and influence of Tokarczuk's literary output.

**Key words:** Olga Tokarczuk, Nobel Prize in Literature, comments

Contrary to the title in a way, I do not intend to talk about “all that jazz” in its entirety here, but rather about what I consider to be its most interesting manifestations. I will refer to the multiplicity of voices heard over the two months from the announcement of the Swedish Academy's verdict (10 October 2019) to the Nobel Prize ceremony (10 December 2019). There is a huge amount of material available (dozens of comments all over the press, hundreds of voices and opinions shared online), although the overwhelming majority of them are concise and ad hoc statements, not providing a lot of intellectual nourishment and not very revealing, which should actually not come as a surprise. It is obvious that it should take definitely longer than two more months for more in-depth analyses and more striking insights around the

Nobel Prize for Tokarczuk to appear. From this multitude of words, I have chosen the polarised statements, because ultimately I am interested in the dispute over the legitimacy and justification of the verdict of the Swedish Academy members. However, I have rejected statements uttered under the influence of negative emotions, so to speak, so I will not refer to the numerous outrageous acts of verbal assault against our Nobel Prize winner (neatly catalogued for instance by Jacek Dehnel). I am therefore putting aside the hate directed against the writer, the imprecations uttered at Stockholm, and other brutal manifestations of dissatisfaction (with the decision to award the Nobel Prize). However pretentious it may sound, I am interested in disputes conducted on a certain level. Referring to the Dehnel's text which the *Gazeta Wyborcza* daily provided with the headline "What makes Olga Tokarczuk such an eyesore to the Polish right wing?" (Dehnel 2019), I will allow myself to remark that the text clearly suggests that the author meant only a part of the "Polish right wing", namely those people who do not really read contemporary Polish literature and generally do not engage in aesthetic and intellectual subtleties. Meanwhile, there are also "Polish right wing" people who are not only well-read but also capable of arguing in an interesting manner (evidence of which is provided by a block of texts prepared by the editors of "Teologia Polityczna": *Tokarczuk. Noblowskie oponiści* [Tokarczuk. Nobel stories]) – I will refer to some of the articles from that collection in due course).

What is equally obvious, the dispute between opinion journalists, usually going on outside literature (i.e. not pertaining to the actual subject matter), over the great honour that befell the Polish writer, is polarised, with silly, absurd statements flowing also from the opposite direction, let us call it liberal, "whose elites are currently experiencing this hype verging on collective hysteria, because their secular saint has finally been canonised by the King of Sweden"<sup>1</sup>. For form's sake, I would just like to add that one of the catalogues of abuses of that other party is provided by Piotr Zaremba in a text under the noble, by all means "fair" title, namely *W sporze o nagrodę Nobla dla Olgi Tokarczuk ktoś powinien okazać się mądrzejszy* [In the dispute over the Nobel Prize for Olga Tokarczuk, someone should turn out to be smarter] (Zaremba 2019).

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<sup>1</sup> This spiteful phrase comes from a discussion of a *par excellence* literary nature, organised by the editorial team of the online magazine "Maly Format" (the quote comes from Andrzej Frączysty). In this discussion, young critics attempt to describe their own position, marking their distance towards the central event that occurred in the literary field in late 2019 (the Nobel Prize for Tokarczuk and the reactions to it). See *Uran otwiera przed tobą nowe branże* [Uranus opens up new sectors for you], <http://malyformat.com/2019/12/uran-otwiera-przed-toba-nowe-branze/> [accessed on: 29 January 2020].

It is also appropriate to explain the literary vs extraliterary opposition (here: in the case of reactions to the Nobel Prize). There is probably no need to argue that it seems impossible to draw a line between these two orders. After all, any debate on literature – even the most academic one – is multidimensional and heterogeneous, absorbing various discourses and vocabularies. What becomes the subject of our scholarly deliberations in the field of literary studies is always wrapped in a dense network of contexts, and in the case of literary awards, this network seems particularly dense (with political, economic, ideological, marketing, media contexts, etc.). So when I declare that I am interested in a “dispute on a certain level”, I do not want to suggest in any way that the extraliterary controversy is outside my field of vision. With regard to winners of the Nobel Prize in Literature, this type of “cut-off” is entirely out of the question, because the dispute over the legitimacy and justification of the verdicts – especially more recently – is strikingly extraliterary, if one may say so. Moreover, currently, narrowing the perspective down to the two months mentioned at the start, we are witnessing a double dispute in a sense: after all, on 10 October 2019, two winners were announced. It is clear that we focus here on the winner of the “post-poned” prize (for 2018), but Peter Handke, the winner of the “latest” one (for 2019), certainly does not deserve being ignored, especially since one would like to call him in particular a truly controversial winner.

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The final part of Peter Handke’s Nobel lecture contains a moving and at the same time saddening reminiscence. The Austrian Nobel Prize winner refers to his stay in Oslo in connection with the International Ibsen Award in literature which he received in 2014. He talks about “one of the five or six bodyguards” (Handke 2019, 9) who accompanied him, and whom he remembered because in some bar on Oslo’s waterfront, that man recited his own poems to him (love poems stored on the friendly and sensitive bodyguard’s smartphone). It’s not that I was moved by the beautiful thought of the Austrian Nobel Prize winner, that literature is everywhere, that our world is full of it. I rather thought about the solitude of the great writer, whose companions – probably out of necessity<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Norwegian media published a number of statements accusing the Austrian writer of supporting Serbian war criminals. The authorities feared the mobilisation of immigrants from former Yugoslavia countries living in Norway, and the risk of a serious incident (perhaps even an attack) seemed quite real.

– were professional bodyguards, most probably officers of the Norwegian special services. How does this relate to our Nobel Prize winner’s subtle reflections on the “tender narrator”, uttered just a while before that in the same place? It was because of Handke’s presence that the audience gathered in the hall of the Swedish Academy had been carefully selected, as there were fears that someone might disrupt the solemnity of the event, as had been the case earlier during the Nobel Prize conference, which the writer had simply interrupted due to the impertinence of the journalists. It was against Handke that a demonstration was held in front of the Stockholm Concert Hall, where the Nobel Prizes were given. Finally, it was the Croatian Ministry of Foreign Affairs that prohibited the country’s ambassador accredited to Sweden from attending the Nobel Prize Gala, at the same time encouraging representatives of several other countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Albania and Turkey to boycott it). Of course, the reason why such a radical stance was taken is well known – this was determined by Handke’s publications and media statements, in which he supported Slobodan Milošević’s Greater Serbia policy.

The trouble Tokarczuk faced is, to put it very mildly, incomparable. The more astute participants of the dispute I focus on here point out that the whole commotion around our Nobel Prize winner boils down to an “unfortunate, ill-fated phrase quoted a million times” (Stanislawski 2019), which the writer had expressed several years before the Nobel Prize and which triggered vivid, resentful, and most often hateful reactions. Actually, two phrases, which – let us recall – appeared on 5 October 2015 in a statement by Olga Tokarczuk being the author’s comment on *Księgi Jakubowe* [*The Books of Jacob*], awarded the Nike Award for literature at that time:

We invented the history of Poland as a tolerant, open country, whose reputation was never tarnished by anything bad done to its minorities. However, we did horrible things as colonizers, as the national majority who suppressed the minority, as owners of slaves or murderers of Jews (after: Piekarska 2015).

Peter Handke, on his part, published a book of essays in 1996, in which he demanded – as its subtitle suggests – “justice for Serbia”. Ten years later, in an extensive essay, he referred to the trial against Slobodan Milošević, weighing the arguments of the prosecutors and of the defendants. He made

a lot of gestures (most often recorded in interviews) considered as highly inappropriate and extremely controversial, outside Serbia of course.<sup>3</sup>

On 10 October 2019, many commentators assured in their ad hoc comments when the news broke that the Nobel Prize in literature for Olga Tokarczuk had not come as a surprise to them. This is indeed an exceptional situation. There were three arguments: firstly, that our author's name had inevitably appeared in the Nobel predictions (both in bookmakers' odds and in experts' speculations), secondly – that opinions had been coming from everywhere about the excellent reception of *Flights* and of *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, the English translations of *Bieguni* and *Prowadź swój pług przez kości umarłych*, respectively (with a lot of enthusiastic reviews in the British and American press<sup>4</sup>), and thirdly – there was the conviction that the respectable and noble (as the name suggests) Nobel institution, namely the Swedish Academy, needed healing to restore its authority. In fact, it found itself in a profound crisis after the leak and moral scandal, which was why the Nobel Prize in literature was not awarded in 2018. The moral dimension of this scandal, i.e. sexual abuse of women, suggested the obvious reflection that at least one of the two awards (the 2018 that was postponed or the 2019 one) would have to be given to a female writer, possibly to a more or less feminist-oriented, ideologically committed and politically distinctive one. By the way, some even expected two female winners. Not only because of the abuses mentioned here, but also due to the democratic principle of gender equality, raised increasingly often, as since 1901, only fourteen female writers had been given the award (not counting the latest one).

I noted – and I can assure you, without being patronising – the bit that said “possibly to a more or less feminist-oriented, ideologically committed and politically distinctive one.” I don't think that these terms fit within the concept of “controversial”. One shouldn't give credence to the rumour that the Swedish Academy members were allegedly aware of the outrage caused

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<sup>3</sup> The Serbian reactions to the Nobel Prize for Handke deserve separate attention, for instance because they explain where the pro-Serbian (and more broadly: pro-Yugoslavian) sympathies of the Austrian writer came from. On this subject, see the article by Veljko Miladinović *Handke – poslednji jugoslovenski nobelovac* [*Handke – the last Yugoslavian Nobel Prize winner*] – <https://www.nedeljnik.rs/handke-poslednji-jugoslovenski-nobelovac-citajte-u-nedeljniku/> [accessed on: 29 January 2020].

<sup>4</sup> See the valuable information concerning the reception of the first of these in F. Mazurczak, *The Reception of Olga Tokarczuk's "Flights" in the English Language Press*, “Konteksty Kultury” 2018, no. 4.

in certain circles (which were not so wide, by the way) by the phrase “we had slaves, we murdered Jews” (i.e. the phrase to which the haters reduced Tokarczuk’s unfortunate statement from 2015). Even less can one judge as reasonable the suspicions that the Nobel Prize verdict appeared three days before the parliamentary elections in Poland and could therefore play some role in the election (by the way, we know who won that election). My point is that only the winner for 2019 can be said to have been risky and controversial – obviously not in the artistic dimension, as after all the grandeur and importance of Handke’s literary output was not challenged even by those who called him a “fascist” and “friend of criminals”. The Nobel Prize jury was probably aware of the tensions that had arisen a few years earlier in Oslo (a trace of which could be found in Handke’s Nobel acceptance speech), as well as of the earlier (2006) commotion around the decision to award the prestigious Heinrich Heine literary prize to the Austrian (the Düsseldorf City Council, which sponsors the prize, challenged the jury’s decision – Handke diplomatically withdrew, declaring that he would not accept the award<sup>5</sup>). They knew – and this is why the prize went to the Austrian writer (it wasn’t the main reason, but it was one of the reasons).

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In his monograph on cultural awards, James F. English formulated the proposition that each award is marked by a scandal, and that in the case of the Swedish Academy, procuring scandals has essentially become an inalienable, permanent rule. From the very start, in fact:

The Nobel Prize in Literature caused a scandal already in the first year of its existence, when the Swedish Academy did not award it to Leo Tolstoy, but to a minor French poet, Sully Prudhomme. At that time, faced with the onslaught of protests, the Academy, not wanting to show repentance (or susceptibility to public pressure), kept rejecting the Russian writer’s candidacy until his death in 1910 (English 2013, 143).

It should be added at this point that the American researcher uses the concept of scandal in a broad sense, going beyond the colloquial meaning, proving very

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<sup>5</sup> This “scandal” and other “trouble” Handke had are described by Karoline von Oppen (*Justice for Peter Handke?*, in: Cheesman T, eds., *German Text Crimes. Writers Accused, from the 1950’s to 2000’s*, Amsterdam-New York 2013).

convincingly that every cultural award lives and flourishes thanks to public scandals. As the author of the preface to the Polish edition of the work quoted here put it: “an award that does not give rise to any scandals dies of public irrelevance.” (Czapliński 2013, 15). The great “discovery” English made is that a scandal not only does not threaten the position and effectiveness of the award, but actually determines its strength, and is a powerful tool with great agency in the field of culture. The author of *The Economy of Prestige* is interested both in scandals erupting in the circles of connoisseurs and experts (in this case: in the field of artistic literature) and – perhaps even more so – in the controversies and disputes produced and sustained by various media bodies. A particular place in his deliberations is occupied by conflicts “increasing journalistic capital” (English 2013, 154), and since the original edition of *The Economy of Prestige* was published in 2005, when social media were only just emerging, after a dozen or so years it would be necessary to add “increasing online traffic” to this.

Coming back to our two Nobel Prize winners, it is worth noting that the scandals concerning them were not even remotely related to any negotiation of literary values or aesthetic dispute. The consensus of opinions is incredible, to the point of being striking: Olga Tokarczuk (not so clearly, but strongly) and Peter Handke (in all clarity, and absolutely) were recognised as great figures of contemporary European literature. Even opinions aimed at satirising and nullifying – from now on I will only talk about the reactions to the Nobel Prize for Tokarczuk – do not contain any comments challenging the writer’s skill, or any reservations in terms of the quality or forms of her prose. This is proven by the extensive article written by Krzysztof Masłoń under what is actually a neutral title, namely *Mitotwórstwo Olgi Tokarczuk* [*Creation of myths by Olga Tokarczuk*]. By the way, Masłoń’s text is a cover story (i.e. the most important text in the respective issue), so the following headline was printed on the cover of the issue of the “Do Rzeczy” which I focused on: *Niestrawna dieta Olgi Tokarczuk. Co nam serwuje nowa noblistka.* [*Olga Tokarczuk’s indigestible diet. What the new Nobel Prize winner feeds us*]. And since we are talking about highlighted parts of the text, let us add that the lead renders the issues addressed in Masłoń’s article nearly perfectly: “In Tokarczuk’s writing, non-Poles are more important than Poles, non-Catholics more important than Catholics, and animals more important than humans.” (Masłoń 2019). Although there are more reasons to be dissatisfied with the Nobel Prize winner’s work, these three planes (national, religious and anthropological) on which Tokarczuk’s work is assessed seem to be of central importance. The result of this assessment – I continue to look at Krzysztof Masłoń’s statements – is obviously negative. It

probably couldn't be different, because, as far as I understand, ideological and philosophical principles are involved here.

What Father Jerzy Szymik said is symptomatic in this respect. His attitude towards Olga Tokarczuk's prose is actually almost enthusiastic:

Tokarczuk's prose is a phenomenon. Topics that are important – today and always, an above-average sensitivity, imagination, great psychological orientation, no boredom during reading (not everyone will agree with me on this point, I know, but I'm writing only about my impression here). It also echoes incredibly strongly for this day and age among readers. Whenever a book by Tokarczuk made it to the top seven of Nike Award finalists, it seems to have always (or almost always) won the readers' poll (Szymik 2019).

Aesthetic pleasure, involvement in reading or admiration for the artist of the word are beyond discussion here, and yet the punchline of Reverend Szymik's text leaves no illusions. It includes a thought noted by Czesław Miłosz in his *Prywatne obowiązki* [*Private Duties*]: “an inhabitant of Poland, looking for spiritual nourishment, either has Catholicism or has nothing” (quoted after: Szymik 2019). The author of the text under the significant title *Czytajcie Tokarczuk* [*Read Tokarczuk*] sees an insurmountable barrier in the non-Catholic nature of the Nobel Prize winner's work. Obviously, due to the author's profession, one could say that this barrier is put up... *ex officio*. Meanwhile, it has long been known that the worldview contained in the prose we are focusing on, or rather the certain spiritual universe created by the writer, is at most a-Christian, but certainly not anti-Christian, as Przemysław Czapliński was probably the first to notice in 1999. The critic from Poznań wrote: “The world that emerges increasingly fully from Olga Tokarczuk's books is alternative, but also non-aggressive towards the Christian one” (Czapliński 1999). In many “occasional” texts, i.e. texts referring to the Nobel Prize given to our writer, this “non-aggressive” nature – broadly understood, and by no means limited to religious matters – has been emphasised. “She never writes against the world or against people.” (Dunin 2019) – one commentators pointed out.

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*Pstrąg w migdałach* [*Trout in Almonds*], one of the best tales about the power of literary fabrication ever written in Polish, contains an important comment, which is however easy to shrug off: “One doesn't write or publish one's



books into a void, casually, for some ‘general public’. One writes for one’s mental compatriots.” (Tokarczuk 2012, 129). I suspect that this assumption (I mean, of course, addressing one’s books to these “compatriots”) is the most serious obstacle – obviously for those who are aware of the consequences of the Nobel Prize in Literature for Tokarczuk, of the extraordinary importance of the event, but who have rather different compatriots in mental terms. It is therefore no coincidence that several comments (e.g. Rowiński 2019, Szymik 2019) included polemical references to Monika Ochędowska’s text, with the following opening, not entirely a generalisation, but not a confession either:

The Nobel Prize in Literature for Olga Tokarczuk is a symbolic event for the generation of today’s thirty- and forty-year-olds. It confirms that it is no coincidence that we joined the group of readers formed by her first novels. Also, it happened at a very special point in time for literature (Ochędowska 2019).

Clearly, there is something at stake here that could be called the formative aspect of literature. Consequently, someone felt awkward, namely those who belong to that “generation of today’s thirty- and forty-year-olds” agewise, but who do not believe that the author’s work represents them symbolically or emblematically, if one may put it this way. To put it in the simplest terms: that it is their literature. The result is the alienation effect which Tomasz Rowiński tries to describe using the language of political dispute, i.e. commonly understood speech:

Today, Tokarczuk’s readers – in my opinion – are those who did not reflect on the so-called transformation and live and breathe their sentimental attachment to the 1990s, or did reflect on it going towards expansion: from the political and economic transformation model to the conviction that it is necessary to replace the existing Polish culture in a process of never-ending occidentalisation. It is quite clear actually which media reacted to the Nobel Prize for Tokarczuk with more joy, which with less joy, and which with scepticism. This division reflects to some extent the political diversity we have today in Poland and our attitude towards the Third Republic of Poland. (...) I am thinking about deeper layers of Polish politics, the one taking place in the experiencing and understanding of culture. Tokarczuk’s readers are therefore people sharing the principles of cosmopolitan and liberal bourgeoisie, the social ideal of the first quarter of a century of freedom, the cultural beneficiaries of 1989 revolution model. It was not so much a revolution against communism, because the post-communists contributed to its creation and were among those who won, but rather a revisionist revolution – revising the model of Poland’s occidentalisation (Rowiński 2019).

I will allow myself to call the comments on the attitude towards the political and economic transformation, the Third Republic of Poland or the model of occidentalisation merely an act of pulling wool over people's eyes. In my opinion, the conflict is almost atavistic-tribal in its nature, it is a confrontation between a certain group of "mental compatriots" and a totally different gang. To put it elegantly and euphemistically at the same time, a clash of different sensitivities should be reported. The trouble with the powerful award such as the Nobel Prize in Literature is that it forcefully demands universal recognition, it wants to invalidate, put in brackets and suspend for an indefinite period the divisions between different "compatriots" (or perhaps "gangs of homies"?). In this situation, resistance just had to appear.

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