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**Innocence and Knowledge Acquisition:
Epiphanies of Knowledge in Olga Tokarczuk's
Podróż Ludzi Księgi [The Journey of the Book-People]**

Introduction

A journey and a book mark the main axis of the narrative of Olga Tokarczuk's debut novel *Podróż ludzi Księgi* [The Journey of the Book-People]. The intention of this article is to present and discuss the intertwining esoteric and religious threads with the metaphor of a wandering depicted as a process of knowledge acquisition. In medieval and renaissance iconography, human life is a pilgrimage whose aim

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to is salvation. In Tokarczuk's novel, the end of the expedition is not eternal life, let alone wisdom or knowledge, but the achievement of a new, previously unknown state: liberation from desires, cravings, and the constraints of the body and spirit. From this perspective, those who are searching for the Book experience absolution, although only those who don't long for the Book's mercy.

It is difficult to determine clearly when a journey starts. Is it just outside the front door? Or maybe it is much earlier, when the first thoughts of undertaking a trip arise? Sometimes it is not easy to specify where we are heading: whether it is a specific spot on the map, or rather a road to go down – the activity of relocating and gathering experience.

Every journey, writes Tokarczuk, starts with a state that could be described as being overwhelmed with space. The body shivers with excitement barely noticeably, the head feels dizzy with landscapes passing by. [...] At the start of the journey, it is not so much about the destination; it is rather about moving in space and time. Thought has then so much space that it can flow with laziness and the eyes rest on a vast landscape like petals of a blooming poppy. (Tokarczuk, 2019, pp. 51–52)¹

Travelling

Travelling involves entangling time and space. However, the traveler arrives at a place other than he assumed. Wandering is a condition that can be defined as “staying in between” – the moment of departure and the moment of reaching the target. The “from exit to entry” space is filled in a variety of ways; everybody discovers the road differently, takes it faster, slower, better, worse, but always differently to others, in his or her own way. History clearly shows that even the most scrupulous journey planned by cartographers, geographers or navigators can produce unexpected results. Technological progress has recalibrated the earth globe all over again, and the increasingly precise lines and reference points limit the likelihood of getting lost and committing a mistake that leads to dramatic consequences.

The diligence of geographical parameters, the mathematical precision of the calculations, and the accuracy of the measurements do not determine the existential dimension of the journey. It is often synonymous of a transfor-

1 Translations of excerpts from Olga Tokarczuk's prose by Aneta Kowalska.

mation – a way to self-knowledge, far from the physical dimensions of wandering. It can be the subject of literary, philosophical, religious or psychological considerations, and extremely often the correlation of humanist discourses. Journeys are used to create travel stories, to search for non-quantifiable and universal values that are distant from the scientific framework and scientific hard facts. Humanities focus on travel experiences that are far from predictable, objective experiences. This way of defining wandering means not only shifting between different points, but focusing on what fills the time and distance between them. This is the overarching value of wandering; at the same time, it is the least expressible feature and eludes story-telling. A journey consists of emotions, senses, ephemeral exultations that change one's vision of the world. It is a way to achieve not only an objective but also an existential experience. Some see a necessity in mobility; others see a different way of life, and others see a life challenge, demanding not only experience, but also an in-depth interpretation. The journey of the Three Kings, described by Eliot, remains an archetypal example of wandering:

‘A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.’

[...]

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,

[...]

We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death. (Eliot, n.d.)

The King, the Magi and the Wise Men – called differently by the Christian tradition – experienced both existential and social changes. The journey to Bethlehem killed their earlier “self”; it indicated a new quality with which it was difficult to live in the “old world”; it led to discomfort, misunderstanding, a feeling of foreignness; it contested the past, the convenient and well-known order. Did they embark on the road with this purpose? If they had been aware of the change it would bring about in them, would they have taken the risk? It is difficult to indicate the end of the pilgrimage of the Three Wise Men –

whether it was the stable with the infant or rather the moment of paying tribute. Perhaps it was only the real start of the expedition of the Wise Men from the East, who underwent a transformation and moved towards a new route? Transformed, they pursued a destination only they knew, the geographical location of which it does not make sense to seek.

The novel *Podróż ludzi Księgi* [The Journey of the Book-People] touches on the metaphysical and existential dimension of wandering. For each of the characters of this novel, the expedition is a personal, intimate challenge, although defined differently. Their route is a spiritual exercise and an intellectual challenge at the same time. The desire to reach the goal – the hiding place of the Book, unclearly marked on an unreliable map – gives these wanderers the power to re-route. The Book was a “glimmering, non-specific promise of change, adventure, revelation taken directly from cathedral frescoes” (Tokarczuk, 2019, p. 25); the pilgrimage promised metanoia, a miraculous transition, and at the same time a feeling of security and confidence in unstable times.

Books and book people

Fascination with books – depositories of knowledge, truth and revelation – are linked to meditation over the existential dimension of intellectual enquiry. A sought book can be a source of anxiety, not only due to its literal content, but also due to the content provoked by its interpretation. The search for a book and the truths contained therein has been verbalized. As Umberto Eco writes in his grand treaty on the book:

Jorge feared the second book of Aristotele because it perhaps really did teach how to distort the face of every truth, so that we would not become slaves of our ghosts. Perhaps the mission of those who love mankind is to make people laugh at the truth, *to make truth laugh*, because the only truth lies in learning to free ourselves from insane passion for the truth. (Eco, 1984, p. 598)

Another aspect of searching for a book is shown by Borges: “Like all the men of the Library, in my younger days I traveled; I have journeyed in quest of a book, perhaps the catalog of catalogs” (Borges, 1998, p. 112). According to Borges,

We also have knowledge of another superstition from that period: belief in what we termed the Book-Man. On some shelf in some hexagon, it was argued, there must exist a book that is the cipher and perfect compendium of all other books, and

some librarian must have examined that book; this librarian is analogous to a god. In the language of this zone there are still vestiges of the sect that worshiped that distant librarian [...] It is in ventures such as these that I have squandered and spent my years. I cannot think it unlikely that there is such a total book on some shelf in the universe. I pray to the unknown gods that some man – even a single man, tens of centuries ago – has perused and read that book. (Borges, 1998, pp. 116–117)

The story of Tokarczuk's book matches what Eco and Borges saw. Her characters go on an expedition, the aim of which is precisely to find the Book, although "the Earth's story is extremely mysterious and complicated" (Tokarczuk, 2019, p. 26). As with Eco, with Tokarczuk the search for the Book is also marked by danger. The characters deny their values and experience doubt, desire, and fear. At the same time, unlike with Borges, they know where the Book is hidden. They have a map, but it is inaccurate because it has been copied and complemented several times.

The characters of Tokarczuk's novel hit the road for different reasons and have different perceptions of the value of the Book sought. For the Marquis, the deepest and most unquestionable believer in the Book's force, the journey was supposed to be a spiritual and scientific practice – a self-experienced experiment to prove self-confidence. De Berle begins the journey full of enthusiasm, with a well-planned route and time. This down-to-earth banker has prepared for it carefully. The challenge is set to consolidate his belief that the world is governed by laws that allow for harmony and balance.

The fact that Weronika and Gauche hit the road was a coincidence. They have become involuntary participants of the journey. Both are located somewhere on the margins of life and social circles; they had dreams and desires other than those of the journey's instigators.

As we have already stated, the characters from Tokarczuk's novel hit the road with various intentions, but the difference between them consists, above all, in their various ways of discovering the world. The path of each of the characters is different, and so is their vision of the world.

The wandering of the characters in the analyzed novel is like the journey of the Bible's Three Kings. They, too, move towards an epiphany that, as legend has it, should be delivered by the Book. They are convinced not only that they cannot reach it, but also that they cannot solve the mystery in a way that is in line with their expectations. They feel ready to recognize the knowledge deposited in the Book and thus experience epiphany:

It is most often clear that miraculous things have very simple causes and that there is no phenomenon that could not be explained by a natural cause. It is just a question

of time. That is why the big magi were wise men larger than the scholar-philosophers. They had not only the knowledge but also the skills to use it. Did they not see a sign announcing the birth of Jesus Christ thanks to their knowledge of the laws of the stars? (Tokarczuk, 2019, pp. 179–180)

Thus, the sign is treated here as a process, a constant wandering and a task to be carried out.

The time of the journey

The circumstances in which Tokarczuk's characters were wandering are not favorable to travel. France, plunged in the chaos of wars against religious beliefs and shattered by European dynastic disputes for investiture, is not a safe place. Restrictions on protesters, freedoms and privileges have led to numerous displacements, migrations and refugee movements outside France. This unrest, which also affects the novel's characters, was not limited to the persecution of Huguenots. The time of tolerance has become increasingly counted and limited. It is easy to notice that this atmosphere fostered the development of organizations, unions and associations formed by supporters of occult sciences. This era became an increasingly evident scene for contradictions and exclusions that were only seemingly irreconcilable. The germinating Enlightenment combined the ideas of a new natural philosophy with a fascination for magic, alchemy and astrology, as well as an atheistic worldview. For the elites' life was both a spiritual exercise and an intellectual challenge, filled with secret rites immediately next to faith in the illumination. All knowledge was meant to give power over not only reality but also one's own mind, desires, craving. In this context, Tokarczuk states:

Only children, fools and wizards know how it is really. They feel that God has little to do with the world, and the only one in this world that comes directly from God is the meaning of every thing's existence and our dream to discover what connects them in chains of events. (Tokarczuk, 2019, p. 57)

The characters of Tokarczuk's novel represent different approaches to the realization of this task. For each of them, the approach was correct but insufficient, incomplete, thus making it difficult to reach the Book:

The Marquis believed that Magic and Initiation were the way to learn about the meaning. He was close. Weronika believed that the meanings that make everything meaningful were Love and Dreams. She was close. Gauche believed in the Word,

which he never managed to speak out, and he was also close. De Berle, in turn, felt that the meaning is embedded in a thing's essence itself, that things meant exactly what they were. It's not a very complicated philosophy, but he was close too. (Tokarczuk, 2019, p. 58)

Types of knowledge acquisition

The plot of Tokarczuk's novel can be compared to a dream. It is an oneiric plexus of historical reality, an intellectual sentiment of the era and fiction. The different characters can be credible, embedded in parts of reality, but they can also be considered completely unrealistic. Realism and symbolism, truth and illusion are complementary, especially when we look at the types of knowledge acquisition that represent the novel's characters. They are part of the spirit of an era strongly marked by an awareness crisis. Science led to questioning the primacy of Christian philosophy, which was not coping with the descriptions delivered by physics, chemistry and geometry, which were questioning the revelation. Intellectuals tried to find their place in this disparate world of ideas, often linking the old to the new, the impression to the knowledge, the dream to the reality. Against this background, the individual characters of Tokarczuk's novel carry out a mosaicism of the thoughts of the era.

The most tenacious traveler is the Marquis, who, together with Weronika, gets the farthest. During the expedition, an Englishman, Burling, joins them and travels with them along part of the road, whereas Gauche "is a random person in this novel" (Tokarczuk, 2019, p. 5). In turn, Mr. de Berle, together with the Marquis, is one of the instigators of the trip, but he quickly gives up. This panorama of various personalities is complemented by Delabranche, an alchemist.

What guides de Berle – reason or fear?

He was questioning the Book, the sense of making an expedition, the reaching of any destination, the liberation of the knight. He was aware that the developments had already diverted them far from previous plans. Everything was left out of control and he was not prepared for it. He felt disappointed and was increasingly determined to return to Paris, whether or not they waited for knight d'Albi. De Berle lost all his faith. He felt that God had entangled their paths. (Tokarczuk, 2019, pp. 86–87)

He loses his courage for an intellectual search and is flooded with doubts; he loses certainty and the ability to distinguish what is certain from what seems

to be. His previous commitment has become doubtful and has given rise to doubt and withdrawal from the ever-increasing bumpy road, filled with uncertainty and disorganization, which, after all, has only just begun. At the same time, however, this cold representative of Cartesian skepticism may be considered to be a winner, a survivor of the journey, even though he failed to experience it.

Continuing the trend of rationalism represented by the characters of the novel, it is important to mention the one who does not belong to the circle of the insiders:

It was a secret society composed of high-ranking people; they have been united by the idea, or perhaps the intuition, that the world in which they live and act as politicians or scientists, in which they love and have their small private fights, is just a substitute of the real one. It is only a surface, an empty space between the letters on a sheet of paper. The truth, and thus the Force, thus God, is elsewhere. (Tokarczuk, 2019, p. 16)

The random traveler is the Englishman, Burling, who is on the way from London to Toulouse. He embodies empirical tradition and rationalism. He firmly believes in progress and reason and strongly opposes religious acts and their consequences. He criticizes all alliances between the throne and the altar and his perception of the world is closest to *science* – a methodological naturalism, a knowledge that gives power over reality: “Yes, Burling really believed in progress, science and strength of reason. He celebrated the achievements of his compatriots. Only science is able to liberate people from poverty” (Tokarczuk, 2019, p. 63). He treats the story of the Book as an intellectual challenge – a fairy tale and imagination, but at the same time as a symbol of the fact that “all these rights that govern matter are a thoughtful concrete expression of the purpose of all human searches, research, experiences, experiments and discoveries” (Tokarczuk, 2019, p. 129). He sees in the Book a source of practical knowledge, patterns, regulations, proportions. However, when after asking a question about the formula of gold production, he is given a negative reply; he is not only disappointed, but he considers the Marquis to be a wizard, or even a lunatic.

Another character, Weronika, is not included in the original scenario of the journey. Her presence is not provided for by any form of the Book’s brotherhood. She is not an intellectual but a Parisian courtesan, and even if she knows the world of local elites, she is not involved in scientific knowledge acquisition. It is dreams that allowed her to go beyond herself, whether they were joyful or depressing. She was intellectually innocent and her entire existence’s tissue was body and desire. Her face – genuine, corresponding to her

first name – was exhibiting true corporality. She has become Marquis's source of pleasure, but also a constant and usually lost fight for cleanliness. The insatiability, physicality, and temptation in Weronika's body highlight her senses and such a form of direct knowledge acquisition. For her, what she herself has survived and seen is true. Weronika is embedded in pre-philosophical realism, which is called naive, based on common sense. She believes in what she has experienced herself and what her senses suggest.

The Marquis is the main character of the novel, the only one who, despite the unfavorable circumstances, continues to travel towards the Book with determination and relentlessness. He is the only one to believe in its existence, in the success of the journey, which will end with a prize. A catholic belonging to a secret brotherhood is simultaneously an adept of occult wisdom and practices. His perspective is holistic, based on gnosis, initiation and illumination. Fascinated by alchemy, he perceives science as both a practice and a spiritual path. The Marquis treats wandering extremely seriously: it is not only a journey, but also a spiritual experience imposed by the Book. But how authentic is he? Is craving for knowledge alone sufficient to reach the target? As we know that the Marquis's intention will not be achieved just before the end of the journey, wouldn't it be better to consider him a pseudo-searcher, a well-trained pupil, but not a wise man? He nourishes a desire for knowledge not for the knowledge itself, but rather out of sheer desire. An analogy of this dishonesty can be found in his relation to Weronika. He only treats her as a bonus; he desires her body, for which he is penalized by the impossibility of trespassing the valley's gate. The effort he has undertaken is rewarded only by looking at the land, the location of the depositing of the Book. Dying at the valley's gate, he does not enter the Eden he had dreamt of; he is not worthy of it and does not reach the source of knowledge acquisition.

At an advanced stage of the journey, the wanderers face the mysterious Delabranche. He introduces himself as a doctor and gives them refuge. His attitude is paradoxical and full of contradictions, living the life of a hermit and at the same time claiming that his existence is committed, embedded in life's full-bodied course, and not passive or withdrawn. Delabranche can be regarded as an encyclopedist, not in the traditional French sense, but as a thinker combining philosophy, history and theology as natural elements on one hand, and practicing magic, astrology and alchemy on the other. He is an example of syncretism, hermetism and natural philosophy, where natural magic is the common denominator. Delabranche represents a pre-modern

way of looking at the world of nature, in which everything is interconnected and intertwined. However, he remains speculative, living in a Platonic cave and remaining in the world of shadows – aware of the Enlightenment, but for some reason not willing to participate in it. He resembles the homunculus he has become – an incomplete man who does not live outside a jar filled with liquid, just like his creator, who is unable to live outside the cave. In the novel, he is the character who reveals to the readers most of the esoteric dimension of the journey towards the hidden location of the Book.

Esoteric ornaments

Topoi that are characteristic of the Western esoteric tradition are extensively used by Olga Tokarczuk in *Podróż ludzi Księgi* [The Journey of the Book-People]. An interesting complementation of previous analyses is to identify their presence in the light of the conceptual apparatus developed as part of studies on esoterism.

The construction of an esoteric tradition is the subject of academic research, which focuses on capturing the historical and cultural complexity of the phenomenon of human intellectual activity. “Esoteric studies” as a research area faces specific methodological problems (cf. Hanegraaff, 1998, pp. 11–61, 2012). The aim of the following analysis is not to take a stand in this discussion, but it is necessary to clarify the nature of the conceptual backup that will be used to interpret the novel in question.

Esoterism was a collective cultural construct. It covered many movements and traditions around widely recognized occult sciences: magic, astrology and alchemy. This tradition has been developed, inter alia, in the framework of Rosicrucianism, the Kabbalah and theosophical formation (Hanegraaff, 1999, pp. 3–19). In order to refine the tools for further analysis, we choose to refer to the model of the tradition of Western esoterism developed by Antoine Faivre. He can undoubtedly be seen as the “father” of contemporary esoterism research, and in his monograph *Access to Western Esotericism* he proposes identifying the cultural phenomenon of esoterism as a component of its six constituent components. He enumerates the following: *correspondences, living nature, imagination and mediations, transmutation experience, praxis of the concordance and transmission*. The idea of *correspondences* presupposes that the world is

an organized structure in which there is correspondence between the various elements forming it: symbolic and material, visible and invisible, human and superhuman. At the same time, the “esoteric world” was supposed to be a *living nature* – an existence hylozoistically penetrated by a force that determines the complexity and the hierarchical order of the cosmos. The gateway to such a world was *imagination* and *mediations*, perceived as faith in rituals’ and mystery practices’ ability to make it possible to achieve a higher state of consciousness – a spiritual, supernatural, divine world. *The transmutation experience* inevitably refers to the concept of a “philosophical stone”, which has been sought by many generations of alchemists. It has been recognized as a material substance or symbolic formula capable of performing metamorphosis and improving the common or spiritually incomplete material on a three-stage journey: purification, enlightenment and unification. Faivre calls *the praxis of the concordance* a belief in the existence of a space in which different spiritual experiences interpenetrate. As a result, it would be possible to experience illumination and achieve gnosis. There is hardly any intellectual activity in which the role of *transmission* has been emphasized to a greater extent than in esoterism. This process was understood as learning through initiation. An initiated master would introduce an adept student to the secrets of esoteric knowledge (cf. Faivre, 1994. pp. 10–15).

The plot of Tokarczuk’s novel takes place at the end of the 17th century. This is a period in which the modern paradigm of scientific knowledge acquisition had already been clearly outlined. The underlying mechanistic philosophy was a conceptual way to overcome not only scholastic thought but also the esoteric picture of the world. However, the *correspondences* topos was still an acceptable element of both an esoteric sensitivity and a progressive mechanistic view of the world. This is perfectly illustrated by the beliefs of de Berle:

[...] he was one of the people who see the development of the world as a desire for greater stability and clarity. The aim of this process is to achieve an absolute static order where everything fits [...]. According to him, the Book contained a collection of axioms, knowledge of which would give insight into an excellent, static world [...]. (Tokarczuk, 2019, p. 24)

The tension between the mechanistically expressed idea of *correspondences* and its esoteric entanglement can be observed in Tokarczuk’s text in the discussion between Burling and the Marquis. The former represents a man of the upcoming new age of the triumph of science: “Yes, Burling really believed in progress, science and strength of reason” (Tokarczuk, 2019, p. 64). Coming

from the British islands, discussing with the Marquis, he evokes the philosophical implications of William Harvey's discovery of the blood circulatory mechanism. The philosophical belief that the human body is an advanced machine was an expression of the view that mechanical effects are the same for all forms of organization of matter. It was thus assumed that there must be correspondence between all levels of the world – nature and human beings – as well as the supernatural reality. The Brit concludes: "This is God, but understood as a clockmaker who turns the mechanism. The breath of God, you see? Then there are mechanics and laws of nature that govern" (Tokarczuk, 2019, p. 64). At this point, the Marquis defends the old esoteric picture of the world and recalls the need for *correspondences* of what is material and supermaterial, natural and subnatural:

There is a need for something else here.

– What if I may know?

– A ubiquitous God who continues to act; a total, conscious force that keeps the world in existence, not a clock-maker – the Marquis laughed. (Tokarczuk, 2019, p. 64)

An aristocrat is a spokesperson for esoteric sensitivities which do not accept the materialistic reductionism of a mechanistic way of thinking. At the same time, his words show another of the topoi indicated by Faivre, *living nature*.

At the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries, a view that combined vitalist philosophy with a mechanistic-corpuscular picture of the world was accepted (Banchetti-Robino, 2011, p. 173). The vitalist component was particularly highlighted in the alchemic research of Paracelsus, who saw it as a life-giving factor of divine origin that allows one to think about a gnostic pneuma. The Marquis's discussion with Burling can be seen as a literary commitment to the intellectual climate of this period. However, the vitalist understanding of the world is best reflected in the character of the mute Gauche.

The world is alive, Gauche thought dreamily; it breathes the same as a horse, a dog, as himself and the sky is the abdomen of the world, moving regularly to the rhythm of this slow breath. (Tokarczuk, 2019, p. 11)

Gauche's vitalist dream is not equivalent to the scientific struggle of Burling and the Marquis. In this way, Tokarczuk seems to want to touch something other than the intellectual and rational form of human beings in the natural world. Gauche is a mute: he is like a human being before the invention of words; like a man before culture who has not yet been alienated from his natural state. From the perspective of the philosophical discourse, Gauche's

dream should be regarded not as a primitive image of the natural world but as an expression of a form of his original experience. It is a world that has not yet been dominated by humans, in which life is not subordinated to scientific and technical progress.

Faith in the Book required giving up the material dimension of the world and life. The recognition of the invaluableness of sensory knowledge acquisition and the discovery of opinion (*doxa*) was a fundamental achievement of Platon's metaphysics, which developed in Plotinus' thought, gnostic movement and renaissance esoterism, among others. The searchers of the Book claimed: "The truth, that is Force, that is God, is elsewhere" (Tokarczuk, 2019, p. 16). This is a deeply rooted attitude towards the world which can be recognized in all forms of the need to move away from what is material towards the spiritual. It was expressed in the "epidemic of hermitage" (Przybylski, 1994, p. 7), manifested by the real escape to the desert in the case of St Hieronymus or stylites in the case of St Simeon Stylites. In these demonstrations of contempt towards civilization, there was a spiritual journey featuring asceticism, prayer and meditation, the aim of which was to get closer to God. Tokarczuk's searchers of the Book operated in the same way.

When exercising the body and the will, the men climbed successive degrees of initiation and finally learned about the Book; it meant something different for each of them. One thing united them – they all believed in its sanctity and ultimate wisdom. (Tokarczuk, 2019, p. 16)

The esoteric topos of *imagination*, understood as the creative force of imagination linking people to the higher world, can also be found in the oneiric experiences of Weronika.

For Weronika, the dreams were the same as little chestnut men for Gauche or mirrors for the Marquis – they allowed her to go beyond herself. She treated them as a normal thing, a type of autonomous night-time life which only widens and specifies what happens during the day. (Tokarczuk, 2019, pp. 30–31)

Weronika's specific somnambulant insight into the transcendent world expresses the topos of not only *imagination and mediations*, but also *correspondences*. Her dreamy night-time trips were a tool of prophetic insight. In her case, this capacity was exploited only for her own use – "She had her own intimate dream book" (Tokarczuk, 2019, p. 31). Weronika was deprived of Cassandra's ambition, but just like Priam's daughter she was not taken seriously by others and her words were not given great importance.

The topos of *the experience of transmutation* is continuously present in Tokarczuk's novel. It is directly recognized in the characters' CVs, e.g., Mr de Chevelion's (Tokarczuk, 2019, pp. 130–137), or in the discussions on the alchemy of mayonnaise (Tokarczuk, 2019, p. 67), as well as in the meeting with Delabranche (Tokarczuk, 2019, pp. 169–175). Each of Tokarczuk's characters is searching for their "philosophical stone". According to the alchemical tradition, this was a necessary factor for the experience of transmutation. In esoterism, this process has been identified as the interaction of knowledge and introspective experience or conceptualization with active poietic activity and material practice (Faivre, 1994, pp. 13–14). The experience of transmutation occurs in the individual experience of the novel's characters, who experience physical metamorphosis while travelling. Two examples are the change in the color of Weronika's hair (Tokarczuk, 2019, p. 40) and, at the final moment, in Gauche's (Tokarczuk, 2019, p. 243) regaining of his voice. More importantly, they are mainly affected by the spiritual experience of transmutation. In this case, an example is Weronika's abandonment of the dream of getting married, where her spiritual change is accompanied by a material manifestation through the yellowing of the dress which she was supposed to wear on the day of her wedding (Tokarczuk, 2019, p. 95). A transition is also experienced by the Marquis, who loses energy, power and willingness to act with his semen (Tokarczuk, 2019, p. 155). In both cases, the desire for the 'philosopher's stone' – although not explicitly expressed by the characters – is the cause of their failure, accompanied by deep Faustian frustration and a sense of loss. Tokarczuk seems to reverse the direction of the transmutation process, which was, after all, a path from worse to better. Instead, her characters' experiences constitute a warning against searching for the philosophical stone, chasing after Atalanta, who can only be captured by fraud.

As Faivre argues, in the esoteric tradition the *praxis of concordance* can be perceived in two dimensions: an "external" approach awaiting a tolerant attitude towards different expressions of religion, and an "internal" belief in the existence of a higher sphere of harmonization and a linking of different rites into unity. In this way, the *philosophia perennis* is the nucleus of all spiritual attitudes of humanity (Faivre, 1994, p. 14). The psychological sketches of Tokarczuk's novel's characters reflect the nature of the esoteric sensitivity expressed in the *praxis of the concordance* in a broad sense. They embark on a journey motivated by a variety of desires, but, as the Polish Nobel laureate suggests, they combine their desire to discover the meaning of truth, beauty and good, which are the core of eternal philosophy. Like everyone who is deprived of gnosis, they blindly

travel in search of sense: Weronika's sense of her existence, the Marquis's sense of reality, and Gauche's sense of expectation.

Esoteric traditions emphasize that transmission is one of their characteristics, eading rationalist philosophy to dismiss it as a pseudoscientific delusion. The transfer and acquisition of knowledge require an appropriate psychological and emotional attitude, of both the initiated and the adept. In Tokarczuk's novel, the figure of the master-disciple is present, in a basic sense, as a relationship between the characters that takes up the roles of mentor and mentee respectively. A good example is the relationship between the Marquis and Weronika. However, in the most important terms, the *transmission* is revealed in the manner in which the sought Book is considered, which although tacit and unrecognizable for the characters of the novel and whether they crave it or not, is a phantom master – an imaginary initiated. The need to find the Book was motivated in a different way for each of the novel's characters. However, for all of them the Book, albeit in different ways, was a source of knowledge.

At the end of the road: Book Valley

'Gauche' means 'rejected', 'unwanted', or 'broken', thus Gauche himself "is an accidental person in this novel...". He is a loyal traveling companion, but his mismatch consists mainly of his exclusion from the speech community. Mute since birth, the coachman has been a silent participant of the journey, the only one reaching the destination. Dreaming throughout his life about being able to speak, expressing himself, which will enable him to leave the "limbo of indefiniteness". This congenital defect brings Gauche closer to the animal and the natural world. It sensitizes him to the dimension of which he is a partial participant. Remaining silently on the edge, at the junction between nature and culture, he is the embodiment of Rousseau's noble wild. Being pure and innocent, living in harmony with nature and uncontaminated with civilization, he is like Robinson's Friday, fully devoted to his master, much like his yellow dog is to him. Fully sensitive to the animal world, he takes care of humans. In the absence of language, he experiences the world and its suffering differently. He sees and feels the world differently, maintaining absolute honesty and innocence towards it. The only thing that he wants is to speak, because it is in language that he sees hope to complete himself. At the same

time, Gauche, who is mute, remains innocent, a treat which, despite fighting against it, the others lose. He keeps his purity when travelling and thus has the chance to cross the valley's gate, in which the Book has been hidden.

The valley looks like a paradise – it is full of flowering and fruiting trees, succulent green grass, vegetation that provides both food and safety. It is in the valley that Gauche discovers delight – of tastes, smells and rest. The book is hidden here – much like the Tree of Knowledge.

And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat; and she gave also unto her husband with her, and he did eat. (Gn 3,6)

Therefore Jehovah God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden the Cherubim, and the flame of a sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life. (Gn 3,23–24)²

Adam and Eve were expelled from the paradise after they had tasted a fruit from the tree of knowledge, which led to their drama. They not only breached the ban, but they also bore the consequences.

Gauche remains innocent until the end: he reaches the ruins of a monastery where he finds the Book framed with rotten trenchers. However, there is nothing new in it. Filled with letters, it is an insignificant trail of signs for him. A considerable quantity of letters forming incomprehensible sequences. He is disappointed, angry, saddened. He voluntarily puts the Book to the side as it has no value for him. Unlike the people from Eden, he knows no temptation.

Gauche began to sob soundlessly and the tears were running on his dirty cheeks, falling on his clenched hands. [...] He was sitting with a tightened throat finally experiencing this initial distinction. He then put the Book back and left the well. It was then that the dancing skeletons with bugling eyes, painted on the walls, noticed him. [...] The Book is still where Gauche left it. So, it can always happen that someone can finally find it and bring it to the world and then there will certainly be nothing left to write anymore. Gauche – Gauche said in the garden to his dog – I am Gauche. (Tokarczuk, 2019, pp. 242–244)

These words have a performative power; they reveal humans' being in the world. The Book opened by the boy is silent, just as God is silent, without giving answers. A human being can reach it through different routes, but they will never touch the absolute, as it is not available for human power.

² The Biblical quotations are from the King James Version (*Genesis 3 – King James Version*, n.d.)

Summary

The plot of Tokarczuk's novel evolves around the motifs of self-knowledge acquisition, science, esoterism, spiritualism and psychology, thus making it possible to show the humanistic dimension of the travel experience. The end to the novel's characters' journey was knowledge, illumination, purification or achieving accomplishment. Unlike the biblical Magi, they do not reach the desired destination, do not reach the Book, and do not return to their homes transformed. The exception is Gauche, excluded from the speech community, who receives the gift of healing, as he is the only one to remain innocent. From this perspective, Tokarczuk's novel can be read as a literary parabola of human existence, understood as an exhaustive journey. Rational philosophy, esoteric spirituality, science and pseudoscientific speculation, as well as ingenuousness and affirmation of carnality are not sufficient signposts with which to delineate the path of life.

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Niewinność i poznanie. Epifanie wiedzy w *Podróży ludzi Księgi* Olgi Tokarczuk

Podróż i Księga to ukryci, ale główni bohaterowie debiutanckiej powieści Olgi Tokarczuk *Podróż ludzi Księgi* (1993). W powieści tej korespondują trzy wymiary wędrówki: materialny, psychologiczny oraz ezoteryczno-religijny. W artykule te trzy powiązane ze sobą płaszczyzny opowieści zostały zidentyfikowane i przedyskutowane.

Słowa kluczowe: Olga Tokarczuk; „Podróż ludzi Księgi”; podróż; księga; ezoteryzm

Innocence and knowledge acquisition: Epiphanies of knowledge in Olga Tokarczuk's *Podróż ludzi Księgi* [The Journey of the Book-People]

The Journey and the Book are the hidden but central characters in Olga Tokarczuk's debut novel, *Podróż ludzi Księgi* [The Journey of the Book-People] (1993). In Tokarczuk's novel, the three dimensions of the journey correspond to the material, the psychological, and the esoteric religious. This paper identifies and discusses these interrelated planes of Tokarczuk's story.

Keywords: Olga Tokarczuk; “Podróż ludzi Księgi”; journey; book; esotericism

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