

Piotr Bogalecki

University of Silesia, Katowice  
Translated by Dorota Mackenzie

# Post-secular Catabase. A Booklet by Olga Tokarczuk

## I Number

*Libretto* means booklet. Its number is fifty. Undertaking the task of creating a text for an opera – a work which an anonymous author of the nineteenth-century humoresque described by no accident as “the most ungrateful of all the works” [“Librecista”] – Olga Tokarczuk must have had the feeling that an epic *tzimtzum* was ahead of her. Did the author of the monumental *Books of Jacob*, however, realize that it would turn out to be so radical? *The Books* is 900 pages long; work on the libretto of Alexander Nowak’s opera *Ahat Ilī – Sister of Gods*, which started shortly after the publication of *The Books of Jacob* (*Księgi Jakubowe*), ran to eighteen pages of text – exactly fifty times shorter. This proportion convincingly illustrates the abyss between the ‘book’ and the ‘booklet’. *Opowiadania bizardne* (*Bizarre Tales*) can be considered an intermediate book, composed of ten texts, created in parallel, the longest of which is fifty pages long. In the *Ahat-ilī*, the Sumerian myth of going underground, the divine Inanna had to pass through seven gates, leaving luxurious clothing in front of each gate, and finally stand naked before her sister, the ruler of the underground world of Ereszkigal. On her way to the libretto, the author of *Numery* (*Numbers*) had to pass through fifty gates, gradually renouncing (this is only kenosis!) the creative privileges of the Author who unhurriedly and alone brought to life “worlds full of signs” in which – as we read in one of her last stories – “distant things seem to send each other some peculiar messages and signals, to knot meanings, to establish relations.” [*Opowiadania* 181] Doesn’t the number of gates indicate the Kabbalistic Bina, symbolizing intelligence and understanding? Bina, which has a numerical value of 50 and which is traditionally accessible through 50 gates, is the female principle of the Sephirotic Tree of Life, the highest point at which one can climb on the path of prayer and contemplation. With its world premiere on 16th of September 2018 at the Sacrum Profanum Festival in Krakow, the opera *Ahat Ilī – Sister of Gods* is an original adaptation of *Anna In w grobowcach świata* (*Anna In in the Tombs of the World*) – a novel from 2006 in which Tokarczuk leaned most deeply on the feminine aspect of the deity, expressing the “deep conviction that through Inanna we have the opportunity to touch in the least indirect

way the huge, distant, forgotten, and virtually impossible to reproduce mythology of the Goddess.” [Anna 214] *Anna In* saw the light of day twelve years before *Ahat-ilī*. It has 216 pages of text and therefore twelve times more than the libretto based on it. Twelve is not fifty, but it also has its own symbolism. The Christian Pentecost allows the possibility of combining the symbolic meaning of 12 and 50. During the Pentecost twelve praying people, with the Mother of God at the forefront of their prayers, lived to see His descent. There was a gift of tongues, a noise, a fire; 50 is the numerical value of the Hebrew word *kol*, meaning everything.

## II Hair

Twelve times. Therefore, everything that was redundant was to be eliminated – the work of glossy details producing a literary effect of reality, which in the stage light would have turned into a chaotic cloud – should have been eliminated, and it was so. The golden-tongued narrators should have been silent; they needed six of them in the novel, but on stage they would have lacked eloquent lips and kind ears, and it was so. The powerful characters pushing the action forward alone (Anna Enhudu, Ninma) and even solving it with their heroic decisions (Geszianna) should have disappeared, and it was so. They should have been split up by the gods as if they were quasi-flies, on whose fragile, half-dead, half-alive wings the task of penetrating the gates of the abyss was borne, and it was so. *Anna In* was stripped of almost everything; what was left – three acts, seven characters, nine scenes – was the bare, naked skeleton, the effect of condensation, the result of merciless reduction. And yet, despite the merciless economy of signs, Tokarczuk managed to add something new, although it might have seemed that not even a cigarette paper could be squeezed into the compact body of the text. It is this surplus – Tokarczuk’s transformation of the booklet into a compact, autonomous statement – that interests me the most. That is why my attention is caught by the hair. When in the finale of the novel Inanna begs Ereszkigal to release her beloved Dumuzi, the divine Gardener, from the underworld, and her sister Gestianna joins her, the dark ruler finally agrees – not quite knowing why – that the latter change places with her brother every six months. The order of the myth is satisfied, the changeability of the seasons is explained, the circle closes. In Dumuzi’s libretto, Ninshubur, the titular “sister of gods”, a friend of Inanna and the only personalized human hero we see on stage, rescues Dumuzi. The sacrifice of Ninshubur is not periodic, but definitive – a woman sacrifices her life so that her divine friend can enjoy her loved ones and the land can be fertile. The offer she makes to the cruel lady underworld will turn out to be an unacceptable offer: “Take me./ I shall love you just as/ I love Inanna,/ I shall plait your hair,/ I shall smear your skin with oils/ and plait your fingernails/ with black varnish,/ I shall cradle you.” [Ahat-ilī 17-18] Ereszkigal’s answer, “Come and plait my hair” [18], sung at the climax of the opera, leaves no doubt which of the promises must have

prevailed. We were just a hair away from extinction; a hair from our heads will not fall off.

### III Polarity

Hair is not everything – although it can lead to a braid. Parallel readings of *Anna In...* and *Ahat Illi – Sister of Gods* reveal a fundamental structural difference between the two texts. I think that this polarity is a manifestation of a deeper metamorphosis of the writings of Olga Tokarczuk, connected with a different approach to metaphysical-spiritual issues or, if you will, religious issues, that are always important to her. In the repeated mythical story about Inanna, I see both a mirror at which, years later, the author of *Flights* has been gazing, as well as a lens in which the essential threads of her writing are concentrated. To be able to see them in their fullest light, however, we must once again go underground – and this time for longer.

### IV Why

“Why is Inanna going underground?” – asked Tokarczuk in her afterword to *Anna In* – “Why does her sister kill her? Why do the three male gods refuse to help her and finally do with such resistance? Why does Inanna choose to be her deputy in the death of her beloved Dumuzi?” [*Anna* 205-206] Apparently, these questions would not leave Tokarczuk alone, since shortly after listening to the monumental *Space Opera* by Alka Nowak, written to the words of her friend Georg Gospodinov, Tokarczuk approached the composer with a proposal to work together on her sixth novel [see Gmys 28-29]. But why, when in the afterword she described its form as a “literary cartoon”, and at the same time she added: “If I could draw, I would probably put a lot of drawings in my work, reducing the role of the text itself [*Anna* 207]? It can be said that the old idea of Tokarczuk’s was recently realized by Daniel Chmielewski, the author of the comic book *Ja, Nina Szubur (I, Nina Szubur)*, which was written on the basis of *Anna In* and whose publication coincided with the opera’s premiere. Chmielewski’s [151] interpretation of the “idea of overpopulation of the planet, situationist utopias

and Sumerian myths”, which combines reflection on the “idea of overpopulation of the planet,” was founded on the radical divinization of the world he created: Inanna and her sister, parents, and lover are human beings, while the titular Nina Szubur – finally betrayed and rebelling against the post-revolutionary orders on her own – differs from them only in her origins; the subordinate post-apocalyptic part of the metropolis. What caught the eye of Chmielewski, the illustrator – the cyberpunk *entourage*, anti-utopian climate, and futuristic vision of the city “floating upwards on [...] huge, empty columns in the middle.” [*Anna* 7] – couldn’t get Nowak’s, the composer’s attention. Tokarczuk gave the composer a compact and poetically condensed libretto in which the decorative frame was reduced and the ontological difference between the world of gods and the world of humans was exposed in order to base on it the fundamental conflict of the work, unlike in the novel. Tokarczuk’s decision was in line with opera’s great tradition, and although in the interviews accompanying the premiere she spoke above all about its particular “multi-level character”, which allows a combination of “humour” and “pathos” [*Śmieszna*], the trail linking the beginnings of the genre (*Euridice* by Peri and Caccini; *L’Orfeo* by Monteverdi) with the motif of a catabasis seems extremely important. As we know, catabasis is not only a literary topos or a figure in musical rhetoric, but also a definition of the Christian motif of *Descensus Christi ad inferos* (Christ’s Descent into Hell) – and, however risky an intuition it might be, it is precisely this descent that the heroine of the libretto’s is closest to. Unlike the Orpheus catabasis, there is neither a love of art nor the elevation of music, nor a simple disagreement to death and the atmosphere of mourning, nor a proper apologia of love between man and woman, but a voluntary sacrifice of life, returning the future to mankind and allowing hope to be nourished. In the face of Ninishubur’s lofty decision, the problems of capricious Inanna and cowardly Dumuzi fade away, the divine Fathers’ dilemmas seem grotesque, and the underground kingdom of dark Ereszkigal is warmer, though for just a moment. Since “*Anna In...*” was completely different twelve years ago, it is impossible not to ask the question again: why did Olga Tokarczuk descend to the “tombs of the world” once again?

## V Repetition

In the history of the animated national criticism of *Anna In in the tombs of the world* at least two moments deserve attention. The first, and less important today, is related to the polarization of ideological assessments of Tokarczuk's novel between *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Dziennik*. While the critics associated with the former greeted the feminist *Anna* with open arms and almost enthusiastically (Przemysław Czapliński wrote: "In Polish, she played a note so pure that it was breathtaking. This is the sound of great literature"). The latter, represented by Magdalena Miecznicka, exposed *Anna In...* as "intellectual pulp", which was prepared with naïve "revolutionary pretension" (this opinion was responded to by Kinga Dunin, while Marian Stala, among others, tried to play the role of mediator). The second moment, coming to the fore in the texts of the critics of the Katowice "FA-art" – the voices of Dariusz Nowacki and Krzysztof Uniłowski – seems to be much more important. They focused on the central task of the writer – and at the same time the prestigious, international "Canongate Myth Series", which commissioned *Anna In* – as a task of contemporary (re)interpretation of mythical stories. As Nowacki rightly noted, Tokarczuk treated the project's governing "rules of the game [...] quite differently" from the preceding ones in the series by Margaret Atwood, Wiktor Pielewin and Jeanette Winterson. Nowacki claimed that she had decided to "reinterpret nothing, at least not within the story entitled *Anna In in the tombs of the world*. The writer gave us a myth in the form of a paraphrase, she used repetition, renouncing the difference, and this paraphrase was joined by an extensive author's afterword in which she included what was rejected in her own story – difference." [99-100] Indeed, if we follow the bibliographic guidelines provided by Tokarczuk in the afterword, the preserved versions of the myth (Sumerian and Akkadian), as well as other stories with Inanna's participation, Nowacki seems to be correct. The simple modernisation proposed by Tokarczuk, based on an adaptation of the Sumerian myth "to the convention of today's fantasy" [Uniłowski 16], is a far cry from the dominant style in the series – critical practice of rewriting – which is present in similar, also feminist and minority-oriented ventures. The whole

emancipatory and critical load of her proposal was deposited in her afterword – but what if, because of its declarative character – characteristic for the genre manifesto of simplification and a slightly naively understood, missionary approach – it turned out to be an unexploded dud? The presence of an afterword designed in this way irritated Uniłowski in particular, who called it "the greatest misfortune" [18] that could have happened to a book. Not only that it was thanks to him that the writer had to unleash a "destructive" ideological war for the novel (after all, "she treated her own work quite instrumentally herself") [14], she also questioned her power of influence, "as if in her eyes the work was so crippled that it could not exist without some support in the form of an author's interpretation." [14] In attempting to extract "*Anna In in the tombs of the world* from the heap of the *Aftermath...*" [16], it was placed by Uniłowski in the circle of domestic fantasy literature, judging that, against this background it would look "interesting and quite original" [19] – although it should be mentioned here that the concept of rewriting Sumerian myths in the convention of science fiction was based on a novel *Inanna* by Julitta Mikulska, published two decades earlier. However, taking into account the high, mythogenic ambitions of *Anna In* revealed in the afterword, Uniłowski finally considered it to be "the least interesting work in Tokarczuk's oeuvre." [20] At the end of the day, was it perhaps because of this that, of the eighteen books written as part of the "Canongate Myth Series", it was the only one without an English version (it was translated into German and Czech only)? Maciej Duda, summarizing *Anna In's* reception in the following way, did not allow for such a possibility: "It is to be agreed that Tokarczuk has regained the myth. This is, after all, the assumption of the whole series. This gave us a nice, one-tone 'one breath' narrative." [129] But by repeating the myth, can it be truly recovered in a modern, pluralistic, disenchanting world? Would that be a task for the strange institution called literature? Wouldn't the writer who was undertaking it transform herself into a priestess or a seeress, as Uniłowski suggested? How would it help in this task that the recovering work would be "nice and on one breath"? Would this "regaining" not mean that there would be much more down-to-earth "gains"?

## VI Working-through

The question about the catabase does not stop asking for an answer; let us therefore risk one forwarding one. Olga Tokarczuk returned to *Anna In's* tombs to do what she hadn't been able to do a decade ago – just as Ninshubur went down to repair the consequences of Inanna's unfortunate descent. And then there was work. For this time the Sumerian myth was not so much beautified, modernised, and thus allegedly regained, but (finally!) worked through: analyzed, reinterpreted and transformed. It is thanks to the work undertaken on the myth in the libretto that it makes us think again. It can be concluded that the correction of the mythical *Anna In* consisted of four amendments, worked out in four important decisions by Tokarczuk.

First of all, in the decision to return to the initial, theological difference separating gods from people – in the novel blurred as much intuitively as, as one might think, on purpose. Although all the heroes of the myth of Inanna's descent are divine beings, including the “role of her vizier” and the “specific, strictly determined” instructions of the “goddess Ninshubur” [Sołtysiak 105-106, 126], in *Anna In* the latter was assigned the role of a first-person narrator, and therefore she had to become a “miserable man, an ordinary helper” of the goddess [Anna 99]. The novel characters, Dumuzi (not without reason was his name replaced by the profession of Gardener) and his sister Gestianna (Anna Geszti), also seem to be human beings – only that their humanization was not carried out consistently. When she hugs her brother, Gestianna feels “under the pajamas his bones, tiny bones, not at all strong, human” [156], but that doesn't prevent her from calling the gods “our fathers” in the same scene [159] – while the human Ninshubur consistently refers to them as “Anna In's fathers.” [45-46] This theological undifferentiating, corresponding to the climate of the strongly inspiring new spirituality of Tokarczuk, allowed her to better motivate the decisions of the characters in the novel, and even to lead their characters out of the dead land of myth, as well as – since “a “woman” in a mythical or ritualistic text is never a woman” [Więkowski 25] – their gender. In the libretto, however, both the divinity of Dumuzi and the other gods are clearly and consistently emphasized [see *Ahat-ili* 4-5, 10], as well as, above all, the humanity of Ninshubur [see e.g. 6, 8]. The opera opens with a confession: “Look at me, look and listen to me now,/ I am a human, a person!/ A brittle creature modelled in flesh./ Merchandise labelled “fragile”,/ Just one of many, to be used one time./ After using – trash it!/ Look, a person, a human.” [*Ahat-ili* 2] These fragments will return at the beginning of Act Two [see 6] and in Act Three, in the proper finale of the action: “Look at me./ Look, and listen,/ I am a person.” [18]

Tokarczuk's second decision was to define the relationship between people and gods as a friendly and sisterly one. The title *Sister of Gods* is not a coincidence; it is not by mistake that Ninshubur confesses in the first scene, unlike in the novel: “Ever they do call me “Sister”,/ they speak

to me as their friend,/ their most beloved.” [*Ahat-ili* 2] In fact, after some time Dumuzi turns to her in this way, afraid of a bad dream he had – “Hide me, o wise Ninshubur,/ my human friend” – and he receives an answer: “I’ll hide you, my brother.” [6] This scene cannot fail to amaze us: Dumuzi, who has been ridiculing people (“They are like children,/ people are looking forward /to our gifts” [4]) and emphasizing the advantage of gods (“We may be divine,/ but sometimes she acts/ like a strumpet!”[5]) now begs one of the “strumpet” to “hide” him “somewhere in the human world” in her childhood “wisdom”; he also clearly reverses Pascal’s famous *dictum*: “I was small and puny,/ as defenseless as the reed-grass.” [6] On the contrary, this request may sound so dramatic precisely because the radical difference between gods and people has not been abolished. The same happens in the scene where the gods, concerned about the determination of Ninshubur, admit: “Human madness terrifies us./ In madness humans become.../ Like gods...” [11] – and also in the culminating scene of the sacrifice, which in the magical world of the undifferentiated polytheism of the New Era could not have its own power, carrying capacity, and drama. In the first act, the drama is emphasized by the choir, which warns the woman twice: “*Ahat-ili* (Sister of Gods),/ do not go near the fire,/ you will get burnt!” [2, 6] You can wrap the god up, but Fire – which belongs to Abraham, not philosophers nor scholars – will not stop burning...

The third decision can be described as a deconstructive reversal of the religious sense of the sacrifice. Unlike most religions (including Sumerian beliefs), the sacrifice of the heroine *Ahat-ili* is not about the propitiation of the deity and ensuring prosperity. Unlike in Christianity, it is not God who offers life in the name of love for man. In Tokarczuk’s text, it is man who offers his life for God in the name of love for the whole world. Ninshubur sacrifices herself not only for Dumuzi, whom she agrees to replace in the underground, but also for Inanna, who weeps for her, for nature, which will flourish again thanks to further love of the God of Nature and Goddess of Heaven and Earth, and finally for her human sisters and brothers, who in a moment, in the closing scene of the opera, will be able to raise a celebratory anthem. As she says herself, Ninshubur does it to save the “order of things” – one that is not quite fair, but the only one we have – while crossing the threshold of the land of the dead, she leaves us with a message: “I shall go in his place./ For we are in need of living gods,/ not dead ones./ Even if they sow chaos.” [18] The gods themselves, meanwhile, are left with a terrible obligation to exist, just as the death of the Son of God “crucified” for us, leaves us on the tree of boundless gratitude and unsettled guilt. When Inanna’s servant interrupts the destructive quarrel between the goddesses, she will do so sublimely and powerfully (in the score Nowak will write: “with great power”, “with dignity”): “Stop!/ Let him go now,/ take me instead,/ let him go back to his gardens,” and “shocked” Inanna can only afford to sigh: “Ninshubur, my sweetheart...” [17] *Es ist vollbracht*: metaphorically, his heart was ripped out from the body of the world.

## VII Line

The reversal of the essence of sacrifice would not make sense, however, if it were to take place in the mythical time reproduced in the novel, “in the ancient time of existence, *illo tempore*, as “then, now and always”” [Anna 207] Hence the fourth step, the most artistically and conceptually difficult, but equally important as the previous

one: the task of making the story historic, stitching the circle of time with the arrow of history, its happy solution, from which the life line of a single existence can emerge. After all, it is the weight of the latter, which is irrelevant in the eternal ring of myth, that the “one-time” and “fragile” like a cup Ninshubur that will be asked in a poignant way: “Does a single one even count?” [14] The question hits a nerve, and the answer is her lofty gesture: a single, counterfeit and one-off gesture, opening up the future and enabling history, a Messianic one. Contrary to appearances, the operatic Ninshubur is not a mythical goddess enchanted in the circle of eternal return, but a modern, secularised messiah – and should not confuse us with a Summery-cyberpunk *entourage*, given up in the libretto by Tokarczuk as much as possible, leaving only the most universal signs of modernization (such as the “acid rain” [6] appearing among other apocalyptic images). It is a good thing that the opera director, Pia Partum, also modernized it. Her underdeveloped vision (as whispered in the corridors, not entirely through her fault) can raise an even more serious reservation. The director’s vision of the stage design was based on a huge, constantly rotating wheel. Compared to its eternal movement, the death of Ninshubur turns out to be nothing. Perhaps just one more corpse, lying at the feet of the people singing the final song in honour of Inanna, as fragile and passive as the cups they hold. If this vision were to meet the sacrifice of Ninshubur – as well as the deep structure of the libretto – in the scene telling the story, the circle should instead accelerate along with the *crescendo* of Nowak’s score, in order to stand still at the end of the subsequent *diminuendo*. Amazed by the “Unheard of! Unexpected! Unprecedented” event, after all, the priest will turn back in a moment: “Infinity is equal to zero./ We’ll have to calculate, count everything over again.” [*Ahat-ili* 18] Nowak certainly supposes that this calculation, so far drowned out by the sounds of the beginning of the holiday, must bring an unknown and unexpected result, anticipated in the verses of the final anthem to the goddess – and in its musical arrangement, in which he uses disturbing dynamics (from *fortississimo* to *pianissimo*) and agogics (the indication is “solemnly” replaced by “tenderly”, “increasingly distant” and “fading away”, while the tempo drops from 42 to 18 beats per minute). In these verses, the divinity

attributed to the addressee of the anthem begins suddenly in the singularity of the “a laughing sister,/ and a wise daughter,/ a wife who’s proud of the/ power of her hips./ [And] a little girl in a rose-pink room /and ageing woman/ who feeds the homeless cats.” [18] Man replaced God so that his sisters and brothers could discover the divine mission within themselves: that in a disenchanted world which questions the existence of the deity, in which we “don’t understand the dramas of the gods”, heaven is seen at most as “the lining of a tent” and hell as “a hole in the ground” [15]; to take such a great, messianic task on their frail shoulders.

Such a reading of Tokarczuk’s libretto would replace the circular story of myth with a linear narrative about secularization. God, who rules the world, goes down to the tombs of memory and can only be saved from final oblivion by post-secular intervention of man, who undertakes the messianic work of history he leaves behind. At least a few of Tokarczuk’s decisions can convince us about the possibility of this way of reading it. For example, it clearly emphasizes Ninshubur’s questions referring to the Nietzschean death of the god – at the beginning of the second act (“What is a human to do when a god is going to die?/ And we to cope on our own hereafter? [8]) and in the opening of the third one (“How much is needed to recompense the death of god?” [14]), as well as in the accompanying diagnosis of the overwhelming indifference of the world to the disappearance of god: “no one took notice, Inanna. / No one perceived the change,/ no one knew you had died./ Nothing stopped, nothing slowed,/ no fuses blew,/ no milk went sour.” [15] It is no coincidence that Tokarczuk responds to these questions with images from Auschwitz: “mountains of shoes” and “spectacles assembled in heaps”; and the visualization of “gravestones arranged in the form/ of a road around the Earth” is accompanied by the number of “six million” people [14], which corresponds to the count of the Shoah victims, the Jews, as historians accept it. The Babelic dispersion of opera languages seems to serve historical purposes, with the dominating English as the *lingua franca* of the modern world (Ninshubur and the gods talking to her), the extinct Akkadian language as the proper language of the gods, uto-aztec *nahuatl* as the post-humous speech of judges and demons (choir), and finally, Old Greek, Latin, and Old Orthodox Slavic as

the languages of father gods in the longest and one of the most interesting scenes in the opera, scene V. While in the corresponding chapter Tokarczuk referred to Sumerian gods (Enlila, Nanny and Enka), who were essentially alien to its readers, in the libretto she transformed them into representatives of three historical figures of Christianity: a strict Father I is Rome, a bookkeeping Father II is Byzantium, and the most emotional Father III represents Orthodoxy. The fathers, who perform their parts at the same time, clearly point to the Trinity, while Ninshubur addresses them as one God with the words “Our Father.” [9] The text of the scene is encrusted with Biblical cryptoquotes, such as: “And you have told us / to turn the other cheek.” [10] Can the last words of the final anthem in the libretto not seem strangely familiar in such a context: “Your dark face with a scar/ across your cheek./ Your letters, your words,/ and your sentences.// Your music and your sounds?” [19] Although similar words appeared in the novel [see Anna 192], now, twelve years after it – after *The Books of Jacob*, in which Frank looked at the Black Madonna of Częstochowa and saw the imprisoned Shechina – they sound deeper.

### VIII If

If the opera adaptation of *Anna In* had been dreamed of by Olga Tokarczuk twelve years ago, the libretto she had prepared would certainly have been different. If her ninth book had been repeated shortly after the myth had been repeated, the adaptation of the novel shortly after the adaptation of the myth, the text after the text – she would not have passed through the 50 gates of Understanding... Finally, if it had happened, Alek Nowak would not have been the author of the opera, probably in the year of publication of the novel, only 27 years old and preparing his diploma thesis – the chamber opera *Sudden Rain* – during his studies in Louisville. If it had not been composed by him, who could have known what form the opera adaptation of *Anna In* would have taken? I’m not even thinking about great music, which has made it possible for Nowak to receive the “Polityka” Passport, awarded to him – as the jury’s justification states – “for or his creative independence and original musical

approach to the world. To *Ahat-ili – Sister of Gods* who restores faith in the future of opera.” [Aleksander] I am referring to the significant influence Nowak also had on the final shape of the libretto. Tokarczuk did not hide the fact that she had been working on the first version of the text, prepared exclusively in Polish, together with the composer. In an interview for *Gazeta Wyborcza* on 17 September 2018, she admitted that it was Nowak who came up with the idea of giving it a multilingual character, as well as proposed the title of *Sister of Gods*, while on 16 November 2018, on Polish Radio Two, Tokarczuk added that Nowak also gave the idea – fundamental for the meaning of the whole – of transferring the attention from Inanna to Ninshubur. It seems, therefore, that the work on *Anna In* would not have been a guaranteed success if it had not been for Nowak’s great suggestions. However, they were accompanied by Tokarczuk’s openness to the potential of her novel’s “score”, as well as an understanding that the “booklet” is worked on in a different way, in dialogue, *a due*. The question of whether, had the writer had not met the composer, the novel had not met the opera, and the word had not met music, Tokarczuk’s favorite myth could have risen from the grave, must remain an open one.

### IX Seal

In the meantime, this essay should be brought to a close – and not by conjecture, but by an attempt to make a statement. A differentiating repetition of the *Anna In* libretto to *Ahat-ili* seems to seal the transformation that has taken place in the writings of Olga Tokarczuk: from her fascination with New Age spirituality in her early “mythophile” novels [Nowacki 103] – at the forefront of her debut *Journey of the book people* and the famous *Primeval and Other Times* (whose “compositional dominant” was considered “incredible”, associated with “miraculousness, irrationality, magic and fantastic” [Wróbel 96]) – towards what should be called a post-secular attitude: an attitude that already emerges in the Flights thus defined by the author herself [*Pieczeńć* 46], developed in the course of the work on *The Books of Jacob* and recently manifested in “strange theological visions” [Zajac] and the last two (and the best) *Bizarre Tales*. Like the

analyzed libretto, these texts shift the center of gravity from the attempts characteristic of early Tokarczuk to “enchant the world anew” [Starzyk 47] for a complex, critical reflection on the presence of spirit and spirituality in the disenchantment in which we live. This is not an easy task, but a salutary one and a most profoundly responsible one, and therefore it directs us to the dominant ethical characteristic of postsecularism. “I can only love!” [*Ahat-ili* 2] – Ninshubur introduces herself, Sister of Gods, Heart of the World, Single Being. And she does what she wants.

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#### ABSTRACT

**Piotr Bogalecki**  
**Post-secular Catabase. A Booklet by Olga Tokarczuk**

The subject of this article is Olga Tokarczuk’s libretto to the opera *Ahat-ili. Siostra bogów (Ahat-ili – Sister of Gods)* by Aleksander Nowak, which premiered on 16 September 2018. Although the idea for the libretto was based on the novel *Anna In w grobowcach świata (Anna In in the Tombs of the World)*, published in 2006 as part of the Canongate Myth Series, its structure and tone diverge from its original. The author of the article conducts a comparative analysis of the aforementioned texts and specifies the direction of the changes introduced by the writer. He concludes that the differentiating repetition of the mythical tale about a Sumerian goddess Inanna can be simultaneously viewed as a mirror in which the author of *Flights* took a look at herself years later, and as a lens focalizing key threads of her writing, including her evolving attitude towards metaphysics and spirituality.

Keywords: Olga Tokarczuk, Aleksander Nowak, *Ahat-ili. Siostra bogów*, libretto, postsecularism, myth, Inanna