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# Always Towards, Not From-to. Experiment, Travel, and Deconstruction in *Flights* by Olga Tokarczuk

*Therefore I call “travelling” the experience of all experiences.*

[Derrida and Malabou 5]

## From *Bieguni* towards *Flights* – the framework

For more than a decade *Bieguni* has attracted intense attention from Polish critics<sup>1</sup> and an overview of the manifold opinions surrounding it would provide enough material for a standalone article.<sup>2</sup> Commentar-

<sup>1</sup> During an admittedly incomplete research at the end of 2018 I found about 60 library records. Thanks to *Flights*' Booker success this number continues to grow rapidly.

<sup>2</sup> Therefore, without claiming the right to any completeness, it is worth mentioning a few shifts in the ways the novel has been read. Early critical reactions (although it might be surprising today) focused not on the features of space, but of time: “Olga Tokarczuk’s novel tells a story about the eternal struggle with the passing of time, about the attempt to regain one’s own identity and about the desire to preserve dignity, even after death.” [Mikrut 76] However, such opinions quickly gave way to the problematization of space, which was identified as, for example, “mythical.” [Larenta] Newer interpretations tend to have deepened the perspective on the theme of travel; this is how Barbara Trygar, for example, proceeds in her post-phenomenological reading (under the aegis of Henri Maldiney), trying to get closer to the category of “intellectual travel.” [Trygar]

The topics of movement, fragmentation and travel – so important for this paper – were highlighted by the author herself in an interview that took place shortly after the shortlisting of *Flights* for the Nike Award: “It seems to me that many people are experiencing some kind of anxiety today. Sometimes it renders itself in

ies have consistently accrued – if not in 2007, when the book was published, then certainly from 2008, when Tokarczuk won the Nike Literary Award. In order to avoid repetition of what others have written, I take two statements from two interviews with Tokarczuk, carried out in the context of her Man Booker International Prize success (May 2018). These statements allow us to outline a contemporized framework for this paper (partly suggested by the author’s own point of view) without losing the background of existing commentaries. Moreover, the statements in question signalize two significant shifts that occurred during the novel’s journey between languages.

Even before winning the Booker award, Tokarczuk stated that the translation had given *Flights* a second life (and that this was also a case in Poland) and commented on the change of title: “The translator [...], Jennifer Croft, decided on a more general, more

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movement, travels, fascinations. And in this whole movement people are looking for a therapeutic sense of completion and meaning. Of the world as a whole. ... A journey can become a kind of modern pilgrimage towards something that will allow us to experience the world in a more complete, deeper, meaningful way, and not as sequences of meaningless fragments.” [“Własny pokój” 27]

open title.” [“W naszym świecie”] The reasons for it was the strangeness or absence of the lexeme “bieguni” outside the Slavic languages, which for a reader from a different cultural circle would result only in the effect of exoticism. “The connotations of ‘flights’ are much greater – it is not only ‘travels by plane’, but also movement in general, a shifting perspective and a bit of madness.” [“W naszym świecie”] Two dictionary meanings are important here for the interpretation of the novel, *flights* mean “travels by plane” and “escapes”; moreover, the author’s commentary expands this field. If we were being fair to the language, we would have to admit that the title *Bieguni* is not obvious for the Polish native speaker either. Commentators usually felt obliged to include a reference to the Old Believers sect, which believed that only a person in constant movement was less susceptible to Satan’s temptations. The novel itself also contains extensive explanations of the sect’s beliefs [*Flights* 266-268]. It is also no surprise that the title was treated as key to the novel; in reviews of the book there were claims that a dead religion was the “groundwork” of the novel [Mikrut 76], and in academic readings one can find the position that the title “explains” that “such an existence, as existence limited to stagnation, one should condemn.” [Bałus 104] The translation of the title is a redirection, a transfer, and a transport from possible religious and existential readings to the theme of travel and anthropology (“shifting perspective”), psychology (“a bit of madness”) and philosophy (“movement in general”).

The second shift is associated with an awkward axiology. In an interview given a day after winning the Booker International Prize, Tokarczuk said: “The term ‘experimental’ is often used here [in England and more broadly in the English-speaking world – KH] to describe my book, so I ask the readers not to be afraid and with some fear I repeat that it is a good read.” [“Czuję się bardziej”] Even if the quoted words are taken from a newspaper interview, what is intriguing is the relationship between experimentalism and double-edged fear and anxiety: “I ask the readers not to be afraid and with some fear I repeat.” As if a classification into a fluid set of experimental

works,<sup>3</sup> could mean a threat to the author that she would discourage the readers, while for the latter, a threat of – to use Miłosz’s term – sublime agonies. The fact is that the term ‘experimental’ did not appear anywhere in the Polish criticism.<sup>4</sup> What is more, immediately after the publication of *Flights* the author herself contrarily described the construction as “realistic” [“Jestem okiem”], while, in one of the first reviews of the English translation one can read that it is “a brilliant, experimental *tour de force*, a book of fragments.” [Saramandi] This conundrum encourages us to include the (potential) experimentalism into the interpretation and to emphasize its possible implications.

#### From Tokarczuk towards Derrida

The novel applies two formal procedures, which – after a proper calibration of the tools – can be described as experimental; the first one is immediately visible – a fragmentation of the multi-plot narrative; whilst the second one is discovered by the reader only later – the lack of a table of contents.

*Flights* begins with a quasi-autobiographical retrospection, which stretches out over the first eight fragments with varying dynamics and partially explains the first-person heroine’s fascination with the phenomenon of travel. This non-linear, yet coherent narrative is unexpectedly interrupted by the story of Kunicki, whose wife suddenly disappears during a holiday on a Croatian island. Although the finale of Kunicki’s story does not lead to a solving of the disappearance, it awaits the reader a few hundred pages further through the book. Before we reach this, the reader meets

<sup>3</sup> In addition, it is not certain whether, from an academic point of view, the novel unambiguously gains such a characteristic. As the editors of the most comprehensive study at the moment convince us, a great deal depends on the adopted point of view [cf. Bray et al. 1-18].

<sup>4</sup> To a greater extent, the implicit use of traditional terminology emphasized the compatibility of the form with the theme. In order to remain for a moment in the discourse of mainstream journalism, a handy picture of it can be found in the commendation accompanying the Nike Award. Małgorzata Szpakowska spoke then about the “acclaim for the craft with which the author, through the jagged narration of her novel, was able to render the discontinuous and hasty style of contemporary life, intertwining independent threads with a common motif of travel, haste and motion.” [cf. Pawłowski]

other characters: a Swedish activist documenting crimes against animals; a Moscow mother caring for her disabled son; the wife of a soldier suffering from the PTSD; we meet Filip Verheyen; and his student, Willem van Horssen; and Ludwika Jędrzejewicz, smuggling the heart of her brother, Fryderyk Chopin, into Poland; and a whole legion of other characters. These stories are contrasted with the second great topic of *Flights*, after travel: the dead body, a theme that returns in peregrinations to curiosity rooms full of jars containing preserved human organs, and in genealogies of specimen preparation processes. All in the poetics of the fragment. Some of the parts are small short stories, others, in terms of their size and themes, head towards a gnome. The author herself calls the result a “constellation novel.” [“W naszym świecie”]<sup>5</sup>

There are one hundred and sixteen such fragments and the lack of a table of contents is a clear signal that a sense of being lost, which the reader might experience, is not an accidental effect. There is no easy way to follow Kunicki’s narrative alone, there is no easy way to find the shortest narratives. If one follows the literal sense of the expression, the “content”, although the fragments bear titles, cannot be listed in any “table”; an individual biography cannot be placed neatly into a table, every journey and encounter is an experience, not an inventoried episode. Neither a linear reading of the whole allows for a continuous and coherent reading of the presented stories, nor is there any signposting to search for the appropriate fragments. The constellation novel allows only for a heterogeneous reading.

The theme and formal procedures place Tokarczuk’s novel in the immediate vicinity of another publication. The book in question is a philosophical meditation on travel, a joint work by Catherine Malabou and Jacques Derrida, published in 1999, *Voyager avec by Jacques Derrida – La Contre-allée*. The publication has a collage-like structure – the whole is divided into differently conceptualized parts, chapters, paths, and annexes. The boundary

between the main and secondary text – Malabou’s commentary and the source – is not obvious, there are often multi-page quotations *in extenso* from Derrida’s works, whilst other fragments are arranged with bravado, on adjacent pages – next to extensive excerpts from Derrida’s letters to Malabou written in 1997-1998. These fragments are set in a different font and against a different background. While *Flights* does not have a table of contents, there are two tables of contents in Malabou and Derrida’s book: the one opening the book reflects the physical shape of the publication, but from the preface we learn that the twenty-five chapters were arranged randomly; the table of contents concluding the book reflects the logical structure of the argument. As in *Flights*, where the readers are encouraged to build their own reading order, in *Counterpath* too they can be read linearly, can follow one of the three paths, where “no pathway has either logical or chronological priority over the others”, and finally can “saunter here and there.” [Derrida and Malabou 30]

I am not claiming that the book by these two French philosophers in any way inspired *Flights*. However, both the focus on the subject of travel and experimental formal procedures lead to such a close relationship between the books that it is tempting to read one in the light of the other. Of course, the theme of the journey in Tokarczuk’s books was not overlooked by the critics. There were some who felt that “every book by the writer” discusses it [Iwasiów 169], and that “space” is always charged with significance [Larenta; Fliszewska]; the deconstructive perspective allows us to fine tune interpretations. In other words, it is worth asking the questions whether, how, and why one can read Tokarczuk’s novel as a deconstruction of a journey and what the result is.

#### From the journey towards the catastrophe

The first deconstruction that takes place in the novel is that on the very concept of travel. If the topos of a journey leads to associations with leaving home, a safe harbor which marks its beginning and end, then in *Flights* there is no conventional return. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator complains about her parents that “They weren’t real travellers: they left in order to return” [12], elsewhere this

<sup>5</sup> The term also appears in the work: “a foundational idea... is constellationality... in order to reflect our experience more accurately, it would be necessary... to assemble a whole, out of pieces of more or less the same size... Constellation, not sequencing, carries truth.” [*Flights* 83]

conviction of the impression of one of the heroes is reinforced: “there and back, a parody of travel” [98], in yet another place, traveling is for her the same as absence: “Whenever I set off on any sort of journey I fall off the radar. No one knows where I am.” [58] On the conceptual level, the return is paradoxical: “to someone from nowhere, every moment turns into a return, since nothing exerts such a draw as emptiness.” [94]<sup>6</sup>

On the reader’s level, the impossibility and, above all, lack of necessity to return means the requirement to abandon the habits of closure, of obtaining a coherent interpretation. The heterogenic reading of a constellation novel must assume that on every path of exegesis there will remain a certain surplus, which cannot be contained. In short: what to do with a fragment, over a page-long, about calculating in a dream the height of a tree on the basis of the area of the town-tree [220-221]? What about Borges paraphrase, entitled *North Pole Expeditions* [102]? They do not find development in other parts, they stand out, are an excess. If the struggle through Deleuze’s rhizomatic labyrinth, which “found its literary representation in the novel”, bears the hallmarks of a journey [Larenta 345], there is no return to a stable project with a holistic meaning. To a greater extent, one can speak of syndromes of interpretation in accordance with what *Flights* says: “The idea of the syndrome fits travel psychology like a glove. A syndrome is small, portable, not weighed down by theory, episodic. You can explain something with it and then discard it. A disposable instrument of cognition.” [22] This forced incompleteness and increased semantic capacity was treated by the critics as a “paradoxical shortcoming” of the book, saying that there is a “disturbing effect of surplus”, that “if one wanted to comment on all generalizations, definitions, ideas, and with due seriousness on all discursive content,

one would have to write a comment of the same length as the book” [Nowacki 20]; by default it is impossible.

Catherine Malabou calls the desire for a safe return of meaning to the home “the Odyssean paradigm of the voyage”, which at the same time governs the “symbolic economy of the voyage”, because within it “[t]he voyage is an exportation ... between the two fixed terms of departure and return.” [40] Just as Ulysses – whose sailing is an archetypal model of the Western travel imagination – would not be Ulysses if he did not return home, if he did not confirm his identity, if he did not reveal himself to the suitors through a performance of revealing his proper name, so the journey of all signs and of all metaphors (more broadly, of all tropes) within the metaphysical philosophical tradition must end with docking to shore, stopping of interpretation. Malabou calls this state a “a metaphysical Odyssey within which ‘literal sense’ always ends by arriving, by returning to itself.” [214]

It is impossible not to remember at this juncture that the last of the maps reprinted in *Flights* was a reconstruction of Ulysses’ journey; and that one of the protagonists was a professor teaching tourists on a cruise ship the culture of ancient Greece, a professor who made plans to repeat the journey of Ulysses as part of his bucket list, and whose life ended during the same cruise [374-402]. The mercurial imperceptibility of the exhaustive interpretation, of the conclusive sense in Tokarczuk’s book is probably more easily deciphered in English – the last fragment is the scene of boarding a plane, where there is no closure, there are only *flights*.

The dispersion of coherent interpretation is stimulated by formal literary devices.<sup>7</sup> And if one was to look for the experimental qualities of *Flights*, it might be easier to find them in the reader’s experience, because a meeting of Tokarczuk’s book with a reader approaching it with traditional expectations might result in an catastrophe of interpretation. However, Malabou recalls that the word *catastrophe* had two origins: on the one hand, *the end*, and on the other hand, a reversal caused by an

<sup>6</sup> The last quotation strongly resonates with the following one, this time more extensive: “A fundamental concept in travel psychology is desire, which is what lends movement and direction to human beings as well as arousing in them an inclination towards something. Desire in itself is empty, in other words it merely indicates direction, but never destination: destinations, in any case, always remain phantasmagoric and unclear; the closer we get to them, the more enigmatic they become. By no means is it possible to ever actually attain a given destination, nor, in so doing, appease desire.” [81]

<sup>7</sup> Cf. “You only see the world in fragments, there will be no other. There are moments, crumbs, momentary configurations which, once they appear, disintegrate into parts.” [*Flights* 204]

unforeseen event, a disruption on a well-planned route. The privileged position of the former is a consequence of the Odyssean paradigm [Derrida and Malabou 4-5]. Tokarczuk provides many such catastrophes-reversals: whether it is the unexplained disappearance of Kunicki's wife, which drives him to the brink of madness, or the wanderings of Annushka from the eponymous fragment, or the behavior of Eric, who carries a ferry of people from shore to shore every day, until one day he decides to suddenly sail to the open sea.

#### From I towards the pilgrim

"Each of my pilgrimages aims at some other pilgrim." This sentence provides an impulse for another, incomplete interpretation [*Flights* 25]. In the first reading of this phrase, the ethical dimension might be emphasized [cf.: Iwasiów]. However, if it was written down with a slight modification, "each of my pilgrimages aims at some other, a pilgrim", then *some other* (in Polish "zawsze inny", *always other*) could be a variant of translation of Derrida's *tout autre* [Derrida]. *Tout autre est tout autre*, every other is completely other, is always other, because we respect otherness only when we think of it as of something that we are not able to dialectically sublimate (*aufheben*), against which we stop totalizing inclinations. From this perspective, the journey is the opening of the *self* to what can be contingently encountered, to what can threaten the safety of *self* installed in the same-ness; the journey becomes quite an adventure narrative.

However, in the next reading, which does not exclude earlier observations, one should note the fact that the phrase itself is not coherent, since one can also read: "Each of my pilgrimages aims at some other pilgrim. This time in wax." [*Flights* 129]<sup>8</sup> Critics therefore stressed that the recurring sentence also has an "ironic tint." [Nowacki 20] This diagnosis can be extended. As the irony ultimately always turns out to be self-referential, another aspect of the phrase comes to the fore at this point, and here the emphasis should be placed on the pronoun "my." The words "[e]ach of my pilgrimages aims at some other pilgrim" would be

to transform "my-ness" into something that is other to itself. In this context the phrase says: I make a pilgrimage and each of my pilgrimages aims at *me*, as the *other* (pilgrim); I, a pilgrim, will remain a pilgrim only if I am other to *my-self*. Derrida to Malabou, September 4, 1997, writes: "In a certain way, there is perhaps no voyage worthy of the name except one that takes place there, where in all senses of the word, *one loses oneself*, one runs such a risk, without even taking or assuming this risk. ... No privilege given, *ergo*, to any of these three words: 'Where am I?'" [Derrida and Malabou 56] Similarly, the first-person narrator of *Flights*: "I entered into a phase that travel psychologists refer to 'I Don't Know Where I Am.' I'd wake up totally disoriented." [402]

The deconstruction of the journey in *Flights* begins. It begins once again, with the questioning of the significance of the place, both as a direction towards which we are moving at a given moment and as a point of reference, orientation, direction (in the sense of *telos*) and self-orientation. This applies to the world depicted in the novel and to the experience of the reader. Travelling is not a middle-class privilege. There was a reason why in one of the interviews the author said: "I didn't mean just tourism – the tourist is just one of the *bieguni*. For me, a better example is a tramp and anyone who has fallen out of the stable order." ["Jestem okiem"]

Everyone who has fallen out of the stable order of the world is exposed to the experience of a journey worthy of the name, because this order is first and foremost the order of a coherent and economic, well-managed *self*. From the very beginning of *Flights*, the narrator states: "The postulate of one personality to one person always struck me as overly minimalist" [20], and a moment later she strengthens her diagnosis: "And there is that other assumption, which is terribly dangerous – that we are constant, and that our reactions can be predicted." [21] Derrida refused to privilege any of the words of the syntagma "where am I" because, firstly, the answer to the question "where am I?" would mean pinning down the movement of the meaning; secondly, opting for an unambiguous "I" would trigger the whole egological machinery and, thirdly, "I am" is the simplest synecdoche of metaphysics and its violence. For Tokarczuk, the transition from the

<sup>8</sup> Cf. other places in *Bieguni*: "as though the aim of travel were another traveller" [136], "Each of my pilgrimages aims at some other pilgrim." [274, 404]

figuration of the *self* to the figure of a pilgrim/traveler means, once again, the dispersion of subjectivity, the declaration of its patchwork and ephemeral character, the exposition to otherness and the ex-position of otherness.<sup>9</sup>

In one thread in the novel, which takes the form of a treatise on travel psychology, told in the form of lectures at airports (although it could also be called travel anthropology), Tokarczuk writes: “travel psychology envisions man in equivalently weighted situations, without trying to lend his life any – even approximate – continuity.” [83] The opposite would also be true for the school of travel psychology: the situation of discontinuity is a situation of travel because it breaks with the image of homogeneous identity (of self, of text, of sense).

#### From from-to towards towards – conclusions

These barely sketched forking paths of misreadings could be strengthened without much effort with the theses of contemporary scholars writing about travelling [Augé; Bauman]. If the narrator talks twice about the fact that the fate of female subjectivity is at a certain age to become invisible [*Flights* 25, 308], and at the same time the reflection on the condition of nomads is repeated several times, these confessions unknowingly trigger feminist nomadic thought [Braidotti]. A longer reading of the adjacency of the two mentioned positions – Tokarczuk’s and that of Derrida/Malabou – would deepen possible confluences. The constellation could be enriched, but the elementary foundations of the perspective offered by Tokarczuk have already emerged.

First of all, contrary to what some reviewers have suggested, in Tokarczuk’s works the experimentalism of a fragment is at no time an expression of a longing for irrevocably lost unity, she does not treat reality as a broken vessel, she does not judge it.<sup>10</sup> For Tokarczuk, the fragment is – as it is in the case of the Romantics [Schlegel] – rather a way of expressing the contemporaneity: it is a “formless form”, not a genre in itself; it astonishes the readers and activates them

<sup>9</sup> Cf. “The writer’s ‘I’ gets lost in this thicket, the ‘I’ is broken into many subjects, the masquerade begins.” [Nowacki 20]

<sup>10</sup> Cf. “Fragmentation is [...] one of the methods of presenting reality – in chaos, uncertain, infinite, mosaic and incomplete.” [Mikrut 76]

[Otabe 64-66]. The postmodern fragment would be (in simple terms) an expression of the conviction that the higher order does not exist, that the search for it is imposed by force by the logocentric tradition.<sup>11</sup> This novel about travel is also a novel about possible attempts to go beyond the Odyssean paradigm of travel.

Secondly, the anti-teleological, or rather counter-teleological, way of constructing the narrative in *Flights* opens the novel up to the other and to oneself as the other,<sup>12</sup> that is, to the possibility of encounter. The point is not that every meeting must take the form of boundless hospitality – the novel does not lack violence: colonialism [276-277], war [314-315], the thoughtless intoxication in power (letters from the daughter of a Francis I servant) – but that it does not prepare for it. An unexpected event, i.e. the only event that can be described as true, cannot be designed. Derrida warns that “if one travels in view of the meeting, there is no more encounter, nothing happens.” [Derrida and Malabou 56] A pre-programmed trip becomes otherness-proofed. One cannot travel to the meeting, only to the unpredictable, although this must also take place outside the horizon of the program. The

<sup>11</sup> Therefore, we should reject the figure of a “fugue”, although it might be attractive for an interpretation, as it allows to merge the form and theme of Tokarczuk’s novel. On the one hand, the fugue as a musical form is characterized by the transformation of the theme by the voices shifted in time, like the theme of a journey undertaken in narratives about subsequent characters. On the other hand, a fugue is a rare psychiatric disorder, it is an escape (cf. *flight*) from both the previous personality, coherent ego and inhabited space, often characterized by retrograde amnesia, formerly referred to in German as *Wanderlust* [Staniloiu 14]. However, in the musical fugue, voices must eventually cooperate according to the rules of counterpoint and merge into harmony. In the dissociative fugue, the condition is treated as a disturbance, a deviation from the norm. Tokarczuk says that harmony does not happen, it is only a totalistic phantasm, while the protagonists live according to their own, multiple norms.

<sup>12</sup> In a different perspective, a phenomenological one, Barbara Trygar noted that “the heroine becomes herself when she meets the Other. The identity of the heroine is based not on unity, but on difference. The leitmotif of her philosophy of travel is difference. It is difference that opposes the same in all its dimensions, it is difference that emphasizes otherness [...]. Tokarczuk, contrary to European tradition, misses not unity but plurality.” [27]

symbolic lack of a table of contents is the synecdoche of this image.

Thirdly, the unprogrammable and unpredictable moment of meeting with the other must take on a different form from the conventional forms of “arranging” the meeting. Tokarczuk is aware of this complication. On the one hand, the time of travelers – and therefore, in part, of all those living in a globalized world – is not uniform. It is, according to the novel’s words, “island time.” [*Flights* 59] On the other hand, in order for the linear existence of each individual to fall out of its usual stream, and create a space for experience (*vide motto*), it needs an additional dimension, a different name. In *Flights* this other name is Kairos, it returns several times [52, 352-356, 364-402], and is a happy opportunity that “always operates ... at the intersection between place and time, at the moment that opens up for just a little while, to situate that single, right, unrepeatable possibility.” [395] Kairos takes on different forms for the novel’s protagonists. Just as it does for readers – and one of Kairos’ forms is literature.

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ABSTRACT

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**Always Towards, Not From-to. Experiment, Travel, and Deconstruction in *Flights* by Olga Tokarczuk**

This article is devoted to Olga Tokarczuk's book, *Bieguni* (*Flights*), for which the writer was awarded the 2018 Man Booker International Prize. The point of departure is the category of an "experiment" used in reference to *Flights* in the English-speaking world (and absent in its Polish reception). The analysis reveals the contiguity between Tokarczuk's diagnoses and the findings made by Catherine Malabou and Jacques Derrida in the book *Voyager avec Jacques Derrida – La Contre-allée*.

Keywords: journey, Odyssean paradigm, catastrophe, subject – identity – otherness triad