

Overall, *Ciało. Seksualność. Obozy zagłady* is a theory-rich book, informed by such critics as J. Kristeva, T. Moi, E. Kosofsky Sedgwick, b. hooks, G. Agamben, R. Barthes, F. Ankersmit, J. Derrida, and G. Genette, and it puts close readings and theoretical reflections in dialogue with each other. It provides a new perspective on issues pertaining to the gendering of radical experience and its representation. I can imagine this book as a useful pedagogical tool particularly in seminars that emphasize comparative approaches to literature and war writing. I can also imagine that Karwowska's findings on camp literature may be further developed in a growing Polish scholarship on the problematics of gender and sexuality in the context of ethnicity and nationality. What I value most about Bożena Karwowska's work is her ability to resist redemptive interpretations and to unsettle her reader while maintaining an empathetic relationship with the texts she discusses. ♦

## Primeval and Other Times

**By Olga Tokarczuk. Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones.** Prague: Twisted Spoon Press (info@twistedspoon.com), 2010. 248 pages. ISBN 978-80-86264-35-6. Paper. \$15.50.

### Chad Heltzel

**L**ate in Olga Tokarczuk's novel *Primeval and Other Times* (*Prawiek i inne czasy*, 1996), one of its primary characters, while inspecting a family tomb, reads aloud words inscribed over the graveyard's exit: "God sees. Time escapes. Death pursues. Eternity waits." This terse message (a quote from a seventeenth-century religious poem) aptly encapsulates the novel's themes. As characters in a Polish village called Primeval experience simple everyday pleasures alongside major struggles and tragedies of the twentieth century, many begin to question God's place in their lives. While the characters generally don't question His existence, they do wonder about His role in human life after creation. He sees, but does He intervene? Does He cause tragedies to happen? Or are humans alone responsible for their fate? All we can know for sure is that time marches inexorably on, and the mystery of the afterlife awaits. While this may seem existentialist, the novel is much more expansive. The questions about our existence are explored more with wonder than with negativist resignation. Ultimately,

Tokarczuk is interested in the ways humans become connected to each other and to their world, and it is this idea that informs *Primeval and Other Times*.

Philosophical questions regarding God's role play out most significantly in chapters explaining The Game, a sort of elaborate board game given to Squire Popielski who "hadn't stopped believing in God, but God and all the rest of it were becoming rather flat and expressionless" (36). After playing The Game, he becomes obsessed with its intricate rules and unraveling the cryptic book that accompanies it. Subsequent chapters devoted to the text of the game provide different possibilities for why God created the world and His subsequent relation to His creation. By drawing attention to the process of creation and whether God has abandoned his work or retains control of it, Tokarczuk emphasizes the passage of time. Certainly the novel privileges temporality as an organizing construct. Chapter titles like "The Time of Misia" (one of the novel's main characters) direct attention to characters' actions and behavior as they affect subsequent events in the novel (emphasizing a continuous and timeless chain of actions), rather than focusing on elaborate character studies that might anchor actions to a specific time and place. Even places and objects ("The Time of Primeval," "The Time of the House") are introduced temporally and implicitly as concepts that are well established and whose ideas still remain significant.

One must also take into account Tokarczuk's own training and interest in Jungian psychology that moves away from purely theological or philosophical discussions of existence to arguing the existence of archetypal patterns. A Jungian interest in the collective unconscious allows Tokarczuk to explore whether characters can truly share experiences. Certainly, in a world wracked by wars and economic and political struggles, and one where God may be absent, people are likely to feel isolated. At one point a character is described "[lying] on his back in the rough, elusive present, and [feeling] that with every passing second he was dissolving into non-existence" (173). Later, as characters approach death, they worry about how they can leave lasting impressions: "What they feared most was that in the fervor of dying, the separating of the soul from the body or the fading of the biological structure of the brain, Misia Boska would be gone forever, all her recipes would be gone. . . and finally, her thoughts, her words, the events she had taken part in, as ordinary as her life" (234–35). The passage of time and death's inevitability seemingly render

irrelevant the self and the actions we have created while alive.

While such questions may suggest that any impression we can leave is transitory, a proper Jungian would likely believe otherwise. Brokenness and disconnection are merely parts of the life process: “Like every person, Misia was born broken into pieces, incomplete, in bits. Everything in her was separate—looking, hearing, understanding, feeling, sensing, and experiencing. Misia’s entire future life would depend on putting it all together into a single whole, and then letting it fall apart” (42). A life’s work then consists of the building of an identity, making an indelible mark on the world. Even if that whole identity breaks apart—in death, for example—those pieces will later be picked up by someone else.

It is also important to note the attention paid to sensory information here and throughout the novel. A short while later, for example, Misia’s father gives her a coffee grinder that is described in detail from its manufacture through its passage into Misia’s hands, “absorb[ing] all the world’s confusion” along the way (44). Ultimately “the grinder, Misia and the whole world were united by the odor of freshly ground coffee” (45). The sensory, a means of taking in the world personally and physically, thus becomes one possible method for sharing experience.

Tokarczuk explores shared experience in emotional and literal terms. In the course of the novel grass bleeds, a woman experiences touch vicariously, a house has a soul, clothes have memory, mushrooms are described as possessing time, and animals dream in images. One could certainly argue that these constructs are merely figurative personifications or the conventions of magical realism, but Tokarczuk’s insistence on connecting the experiences of flora, fauna, and even inanimate objects to the human experience, never privileging one over the other, indicates a desire to unify all experience in a way vital to the novel’s themes. These constructs are inherently empathetic. Tokarczuk ultimately argues that sharing experience among all worldly things is a prerequisite for living. In fact, if we cannot know the nature of God or if he is an illusion or may have taken leave from us, we are left with our attachments, physical and emotional, to this world. *Primeval* shows us that in the past century’s turbulence experience itself may be the only means left for us to share with others, and the only trace we leave in the world. ♦

## A Postcard From The Volcano

**By Lucy Beckett.** San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press (Ignatius.com), 2009. 520 pages. ISBN 978-15861-72695. Paper. \$16.95 (plus postage) from the publisher.

### Raymond Gawronski, SJ

**A**ncient Poland, like Ireland, had five main geographical divisions. The westernmost, Pomerania and Silesia, were subject to a centuries-long cultural penetration by the German Empire to the West such that by the High Middle Ages, the two provinces were well on their way to becoming the German provinces they eventually were. Silesia, with its capital of Breslau (Wrocław) was especially rich culturally and materially. It is perhaps best known for its spiritual children Angelus Silesius, Eichendorff, and St. Edith Stein. With its ancient Slavic place names and bishopric of Vratislava, with a residual Slavic presence in its villages—gradually increasing toward the east until Upper Silesia itself opted to join prewar Poland—Silesia was variously Polish and Czech, Austrian, Prussian, German, and, after the Second World War, Polish again. Vast shifts of population followed the war here as in the rest of East Central Europe, such that today Silesia is a Polish province with its capital Wrocław.

**The hatred of the [Catholic] Poles that this book betrays is astounding, and it feeds the monumental Polonophobia that is woven into the social and cultural fabric of American society. . . . It is a mystery why the premier Catholic press in America should publish a book that. . . is venomous and manifestly unfair in its treatment of the one nation in Europe that. . . produced more martyrs than any other for saving Jewish people during the Second World War, and that itself walked through a Via Dolorosa, producing more saints—and sainted priests—than any of its richer neighbors.**

English scholar Lucy Beckett selects Silesia as the stage for her very interesting if seriously flawed novel, *A Postcard from the Volcano*. The novel begins in 1914 and continues to just before the Second World War. The story follows the life of a young Prussian count, Max von Hofmannswaldau, from an ancient Silesian family. Very soon in the story we learn that Max’s mother’s family, Protestants for several generations—