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Journey between two languages

Interview with Estera Czoj, translator of Polish literature
into Korean, on translating Olga Tokarczuk's texts
– by Wioletta Hajduk-Gawron

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Abstract: The interview is dedicated to translations of Olga Tokarczuk's texts into Korean. Korean translator Estera Czoj shares the inside story on her work on the Nobel Prize winner's books, recalls fragments of novels that turned out to be real translation challenges, her first meeting with Olga Tokarczuk, and the writer's visit to South Korea. The interview also addresses the aspect of the publishing strategies of Korean publishing houses, as well as the reception of Polish literature in South Korea.

Key words: Olga Tokarczuk, Estera Czoj, translations of Polish literature into Korean

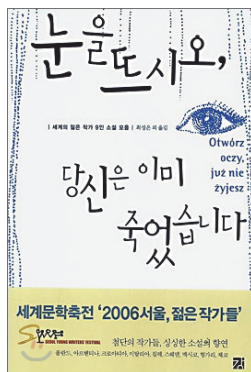
Wioletta Hajduk-Gawron: Until October 2019, you had been the only translator of Polish literature into Korean, and the numerous texts you had translated included works of two Polish winners of the Nobel Prize for Literature – Henryk Sienkiewicz and Wisława Szymborska. Today, one can say that you were the first to translate the texts of three Polish Nobel Prize winners into Korean. Can you tell us how your adventure with Olga Tokarczuk started? By reading her book? Which one, if this is what hap-

pened? Or perhaps you met personally? Do you remember your impressions from the first book, or from the first meeting?

Estera Czoj (Korean: Sungeun Choi): I encountered Olga for the first time through her book *Prawiek i inne czasy* [*Primeval and Other Times*] back in 2000. Only later, in 2006, was I able to personally meet my favourite prose writer, when she attended the 2006 Seoul Young Writers' Festival, organised by the Literature Translation Institute of Korea¹. I still remember my first impression after reading *Primeval and Other Times*. When I finished the book, my world started to look different, suddenly it became special, extraordinary. I already sensed at that time that a new master had appeared among Polish writers.

W.H.-G.: How did you meet Olga Tokarczuk?

E.C.: I met her through e-mail correspondence. When the Literature Translation Institute of Korea organised the Seoul Young Writers' Festival in 2006, which I have already mentioned, I was asked to recommend a writer from Poland. I instantly thought of Olga and wrote her an e-mail. She immediately expressed her desire to attend the festival. 15 writers from 15 countries came to South Korea at that time. Since most of their works had not been translated into Korean, the KLTI decided to publish an anthology of their short stories. Each writer was to choose one text. Olga went for *Otwórz oczy, już nie żyjesz* [*Open Your Eyes, You Are Dead*] from the volume *Gra na wielu bębenkach* [*Playing on Many Drums*]. I had the pleasure of translating it. It was actually the one the editors liked the most, which is why its title served as the title for the whole anthology.



¹ Literature Translation Institute of Korea (LTI Korea) is a government organisation operating at the Ministry of Culture, similar to Instytut Książki (Book Institute) in Poland.

W.H.-G.: What kind of person do you think Olga Tokarczuk is? Does she make friends easily? Do you remember your first conversation? Does Olga Tokarczuk have an awe-inspiring presence?

E.C.: Olga is the most empathic person I know, and I made friends with her quickly. If I remember correctly, Olga started our first conversation with the following words: “Oh, so this is you, Estera?” I shyly nodded only my head, because I couldn’t believe that Olga Tokarczuk was standing right in front of me. I remember her incredibly warm glance, I immediately felt as if I were her friend. There is a 9-year age difference between us², but I have never felt this in her company, because she is extremely open and empathic.

W.H.-G.: Did Olga Tokarczuk meet with her readers when she came to Korea? How do you recall that time?

E.C.: After the 2006 Seoul Young Writers’ Festival, Olga stayed in Korea for another week and during this time we went sightseeing together. She also visited our faculty and gave a guest lecture on her work, and then had a beer with students of Polish Studies at the lakeside campus. At that time, she said it was amazing that one could talk in Polish in a country so far away from Poland.

We also went to the demilitarized zone because Olga wanted to see the border between South Korea and North Korea. She stood there for a very long time and looked at the 4-kilometre-wide strip of land separating the two countries. She said she was amazed by the wildlife, the free-roaming animals and the wonderful plants growing there. It was hard for her to believe that this apparent paradise was located between two countries at war with each other.

I recall an anecdote from Olga’s visit to Korea. She wanted to experience the life of Buddhism practitioners and learn about different aspects of Korean Buddhist culture (through the Temple Stay programme), so I booked a place for her at the Youngmunsa temple, among the most beautiful ones in Korea. I had my classes to teach and responsibilities at the university, so I couldn’t go with her. Olga is curious about the world, she’s interested in Buddhist philosophy, and she asked the abbot if they could talk while she was there at the temple. He agreed, but he didn’t speak either Polish or English. The monks started looking for someone who’d speak English (the temple is located in the mountains and a decent interpreter is hard to find

² In Korea and in the Korean language, politeness and etiquette are based on the principle of honorifics, with age being the most important category determining the relationship between the interlocutors and the way in which they address each other – ed.

there), and finally they found a young man who was doing military service not far from the temple. It turned out that he'd studied in the USA and spoke good English (that's what Olga said). The conversation took place then. I wonder if the young man (who's probably thirty something now) recalls the name and face of Olga Tokarczuk and whether he realises that 13 years ago, he did an interpreting job for a future Nobel Prize winner.

W.H.-G.: Which was the first book by Tokarczuk you translated? Who made the choice, you or the publisher?

E.C.: In 2017, an editor from the Ūnhaeng Namu publishing house, whom I had known for over 10 years (I'd worked with her in 2005 on the translation of *Quo Vadis*), asked me to choose one of Olga Tokarczuk's works to translate. The publishing house believed that the Polish writer would get the Nobel Prize for Literature in the future. My recommendation was *Primeval and Other Times*. A month after that, the most prestigious literary publishing house in Korea, Minumsa, contacted me and proposed that I translate the novel *Dom dzienny, dom nocny* [*House of Day, House of Night*], asking me at the same time to recommend one more piece. I immediately pointed to *Bieguni* [*Flights*] (this was before Olga Tokarczuk received The Man Booker International Prize for that novel). I asked whether I could actually translate *Flights* first, because it is was my favourite work by Olga Tokarczuk.

W.H.-G.: How do you plan the process when translating a novel? Does translating Tokarczuk's texts differ from other translation work of yours?

E.C.: I always read the piece first from start to end, and only then do I proceed to the translation. This is my way of working. I do the same with Olga's books. However, they are much more enjoyable and easier for me to translate compared to works by other writers because, as we know, in *Flights* and *Primeval* the author builds the plot using short quasi-chapters and fragmentary stories (for example, *Flights* is a collection of 116 stories that share a single theme, that of travelling). Consequently, I was able to work on the translation systematically, all I had to do was complete the translation of one story at a time and continue step by step until the end. This structure allows translators to breathe, making the process calm and pleasant, without haste.

W.H.-G.: Is there anything special about Tokarczuk's work compared to the works of other Polish writers?

E.C.: It seems to me that Olga Tokarczuk's works have this universal humanism in them, despite the fact that their themes concern local problems, and many of them are set in small towns in Poland. Olga describes ordinary people, their feelings, emotions and experiences in a poetic and

genuinely poignant way. In my opinion, Olga's work is full of tenderness for the world and for other people, and this is what makes it so amazing.

W.H.-G.: What difficulties do you see for Koreans reading translations of Tokarczuk's texts? What do you usually put in your footnotes? Because you do insert them, don't you?

E.C.: Korean readers are used to footnotes, one could even say that they are addicted to them, so translators of foreign literature have to spend quite a bit of time to provide the texts with the appropriate annotations. *Primeval* starts at the beginning of World War I and ends in the 1980s, and it takes place in Poland. In Korea, few people actually know 20th century European history, and even less so Polish history. I had to insert footnotes whenever historical facts appeared, e.g. references to the partitions of Poland or the Polish car make Warszawa.

Flights, on the other hand, mention historical figures from different periods and places, e.g. Benedykt Chmielowski, Flavius Josephus, Angelo Soliman, Austrian emperor Francis I, as well as scientists specialising in anatomy and human body plastination, such as Gunther von Hagens, Andreas Vesalius, and Jean-Honoré Fragonard. In such cases, the Korean reader expects explanations.

W.H.-G.: Do you ever contact Olga Tokarczuk when translating her books?

E.C.: When I was translating *Flights*, I contacted the author only once by e-mail, asking about the chapter entitled "*Things Not Made by Human Hands*", and more precisely about the following fragment:

[After seeing the sarira relics exhibition I can say that I'm no longer much surprised by things not made by human hands. These include the tomes that appear spontaneously in the damp of mountain caves and let themselves be found every once in a while by righteous humans, who then ceremoniously transfer them to temples. (translation: Jennifer Croft)].

I didn't know what books and what religion it referred to (it was the first time I'd ever heard the story). Olga promptly wrote back with an explanation: "This passage concerns certain legends, widespread in Orthodoxy and, for example, also in Tibetan Buddhism, about important items, which were not made by humans, but brought to existence by the doing of some God/gods or by supernatural forces."

W.H.-G.: What is untranslatable in Tokarczuk's books?

E.C.: Her work contains a certain reinterpretation of myths, especially Roman and Greek ones. This may make it difficult for Korean readers

to understand the meaning of metaphors. Let me give you an example: in *Flights*, Olga Tokarczuk replaced the Greek island of Crete with the labyrinth of Knossos built for the Minotaur with the Croatian island of Vis, with an olive bush in the form of a labyrinth, turning out to be a trap for the wife and child of Kunicki (one of the characters in the story). Both references are obscure to the Korean reader, so it doubles the difficulty.

W.H.-G.: Are there any places/words/fragments that you change by referring to certain Korean realities in order to render the meaning of the original?

E.C.: I remember one passage from *Primeval*. I didn't change its meaning, but I really struggled when it came to finding the equivalent of the word "Boże" ["Oh God"] in Korean.

[One day, when Izydor was staring at his piece of sky, he had a revelation. He realised that God is neither a man nor a woman. He knew it as he uttered the words "O God." Here lay the solution to the problem of God's gender. By making it into one word, "Ogod," it sounded neither masculine or feminine, but neutral, just like "oak tree," "opal," "ocean," "odour," "oatmeal," "omen," "open,"... Izydor excitedly repeated the real divine name that he had discovered, and every time he did, he knew more and more. So Ogod was young, and at the same time had existed since the beginning of the world or even earlier, without cease (because "Ogod" reminded him of "over and over"), it was unique and unrepeatable ("only"), and it was the start and finish of everything ("omega"), though if you tried to find it, it wasn't there ("n-owhere"). Ogod was full of love and joy, but could also be cruel and dangerous. It contained all the features and attributes that are present in the world, and took on the form of every thing, every event, every time. It created and destroyed, or allowed what It created to destroy itself. It was unpredictable like a child, like someone insane. (translation: Antonia Lloyd-Jones)]

I had a problem with it because in Korean, words have no gender. Here, however, words in the neuter gender been used to show indeterminacy (God is neither male nor female). I finally chose the word "하느님 (Hanūnim)" "God"³, because there is a similar expression to "Oh (my) God!" in Korean: "하느님 맏소사 (Hanūnim mapsosal)". Instead of

³ According to various estimates, slightly above 10% of the South Korean population are Catholics.

words ending with an “e”, like in the original, I listed in alphabetical order words beginning with “ \bar{o} (h)”, trying to render the original meanings (“always”, “food”, “everywhere”, “nowhere”, etc.).

W.H.-G.: The translator usually has a rich imagination. When translating Tokarczuk’s texts, do you tend to imagine the place where she wrote them? I know you know her house.

E.C.: When I was reading *House of Day*, *House of Night* and translating *Primal and Other Times*, I’d see some pictures and views of Nowa Ruda, where I’d had the opportunity to spend some time with Olga in July 2008. I still see the beautiful landscape of Nowa Ruda from time to time in my dreams, and I often hear the signing of birds from that village. It was a really special, unforgettable time in my life.

W.H.-G.: What’s coming up next? Are you planning to translate another book by Tokarczuk? Is it up to you or to your publisher?

E.C.: I’m planning to translate the novel *Prowadź swój pług przez kości umarłych* [*Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*]. In February 2019, I managed to convince the publisher to publish it. They agreed mainly because Tokarczuk criticises patriarchal, anthropocentric theses in the book. This is a trendy topic in the Korean publishing market. The editor’s decision was also significantly influenced by the film adaptation of the novel directed by Agnieszka Holland, as well as by the Alfred Bauer Prize for innovation which the film won at the Berlinale in 2017. The book will be published by Minumsa, which has already published *Flights*.

W.H.-G.: How did Olga Tokarczuk’s books find their way to Korean bookshops? What are the publishing companies’ strategies, where do they get knowledge as to what is worth translating? Do Korean publishers conduct research in other publishing markets, such as Japan, China or European countries?

E.C.: As I have already mentioned, Korean publishers were expecting Olga Tokarczuk to be awarded the Nobel Prize sooner or later. They were investing in the future, in a way. They say in Korea that a publishing house buys Nobel Prize for Literature shares when it decides to publish a book by a foreign author who is relatively little known, but artistically high quality. In the case of Olga Tokarczuk, they were assuming that she would win the Nobel Prize in about 10–15 years.

W.H.-G.: The publishing house runs a certain risk publishing Tokarczuk’s works. It’s important to make sure that the book finds its reader. Who are Olga Tokarczuk’s Korean readers?

E.C.: Olga's works are original, intriguing and ambitious. One simply wants to read such books, and return to them many times in the future. Since Olga Tokarczuk was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, I've had the opportunity many times to give lectures on her writing to Korean readers in various bookshops (such events are currently very much en vogue in Korea). During such meetings, I have noticed that Tokarczuk's readers are people of different age groups, younger and older. However, what is really clear is that they all genuinely love fiction, that they are smart and wise. Conversations with them have made me realise how nice it is to make contact with readers – it's a pleasure to meet someone you didn't know at all, but you understand each other perfectly, because you share this love for Olga Tokarczuk's books.

W.H.-G.: What's the situation with Polish literature in Korea? Does anyone else translate it into Korean apart from you?

E.C.: I have translated 30 Polish books⁴. When it comes to adult fiction, this is the largest number in Korea. Children's books, on the other hand, are the domain of fellow translator Jiwone Lee, who's also an art historian and curator of children's illustration. Thanks to her, Polish illustrators of children's books have got recognition in Korea. I translated *Pan Tadeusz* in a team together with Jiwone Lee and Professor Byung-Kwon Cheong, the founder of Polish Studies at HUFS. Two years ago, he translated Bolesław Prus's *Lalka* [*The Doll*] into Korean.

W.H.-G.: Do you collaborate with fellow translators from other countries (e.g. China, for instance Professor Yi Lijun⁵), do you ever discuss your translations, and make some decisions together?

E.C.: I meet translators of Olga Tokarczuk's books from other countries only during the World Congress of Translators of Polish Literature organised by the Book Institute every 4 years. We sometimes share our translation experiences there, but that's it. My mother tongue, i.e. Korean, is a language whose origin is undetermined, an isolated language, so I have to deal with the problems on my own.

But Professor Yi Lijun from China is simply a guru to me! Unfortunately, we do not have regular contact, but I always boast about having something in common with her – namely the date of birth. We both celebrate it on December 4th (what a coincidence!). There was yet another person

⁴ This interview is complemented by a list of translations of Polish literature into Korean, compiled by Barbara Liberda.

⁵ See the interview included in this issue.

born on the same day – Rainer Maria Rilke, the poet. I feel honoured to have something in common with such outstanding figures.

W.H.-G.: Jerzy Jarniewicz (2002, 38) suggests that translators may be classified into two categories. The first includes translators-ambassadors. They follow their source culture carefully, watching carefully all the aspects that form it and picking the best and most interesting works. They do not place the literature they translate in a new light, they do not offer risky or independent judgments. They try to bring canonical writers, who write in different poetics and hold different views, closer to the readers. The second category includes translators-legislators. For them, hierarchies and ranking lists do not matter, as they are primarily interested in the condition of their native culture and of the target language. Their attention is drawn to texts that are capable of entering into a dialogue with their native literature, offering it new models, new languages, and new criteria. One could say that such translators lay down a new artistic law to guide their work. This law is based above all on the artist's need rather than on the publishing market. Could you say which category of translators you'd belong to in the context of Tokarczuk's texts?

E.C.: I think that as far as *Primeval* is concerned, I could be classified as a translator-ambassador. In the case of my translation of *Flights*, however, I would rather belong in the second category, that of translators-legislators.

W.H.-G.: A translator has a lot of power when it comes to the promotion of foreign literature. Translators and experts in the field of Polish literature as a foreign literature agree with this (cf. Pióro 2000). Often, the personal contacts of the translator with the Polish author, the translator's interests and the reviews the book receives in Poland determine that this particular work is translated, while the aspect of the publishing house becomes a matter of secondary importance. Government grants, such as the ©POLAND Translation Programme run by the Book Institute, also definitely contribute to extending the reach of translations of Polish literature. The scope of reception for a writer's work is also extended by several factors, including the awards the author has already received, the author's relationship with the country and the language into which the work is to be translated, whether the themes are relevant to the foreign audiences and, finally, whether the works fill gaps in the literature and culture of audiences foreign in terms of language and culture. Do you agree with these statements in the context of translating Tokarczuk's texts into Korean?

E.C.: In the case of Olga Tokarczuk's books, there were no government subsidies from Poland. The writer's name has simply been known in the

literary world for a decade or so, and consequently Korean publishers took a natural interest in her work. In my opinion, the main reason is the prospect of receiving international literary awards, including the Nobel Prize. Another important factor is certainly the range of themes addressed, new ones and ones which Korean readers find to be relevant – such as the nomadic nature of humans, the attempt to look at the world around us in a different way, myth as a universal model of human fate, the combination of realism and fantasy, rational description and magic – that is, filling gaps in Korean literature and culture.

W.H.-G.: Have you read all of Tokarczuk's books, or just the ones you translated?

E.C.: Not all of them, unfortunately, but I have managed to read the vast majority of them. I've only translated two so far: *Primeval and Other Times* and *Flights*. I've also read *House of Day*, *House of Night*, *E.E.*, *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, *Playing on Many Drums*, *Zgubiona dusza* [*Lost Soul*] and *Opowiadania bizuarne* [*Bizarre Stories*]. I have to admit that I haven't managed to read *Księgi Jakubowe* [*The Books of Jacob*] yet.

W.H.-G.: Thank you for the conversation. I hope you'll embark on other, equally successful journeys between our languages in the future too!

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Her scientific interests span comparative studies, contemporary Polish poetry, and literary translation. Her most important publications include: *Korea w polskich utworach literackich: od pierwszej wzmianki do współczesności*, in: *Spotkania Polonistyk Trzech Krajów – Chiny, Korea, Japonia*, vol. 1, (Tokyo 2009); *Poezja Wisławy Szymborskiej z perspektywy filozofii Lao-Zhuanga*, in: Cudak R., ed., *Literatura polska w świecie*, vol. 3, *Obecności* (Katowice 2010); *Recepcja poezji Wisławy Szymborskiej w Korei Południowej*, "Pamiętnik Literacki" 2014, no. 4. In 2012, she was awarded the Knight's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland.

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All of the above-mentioned pieces were translated by Estera Czoj between the years 2003 and 2019. It is an updated version of the list drawn up by Estera Czoj, which was published in 2019: *Translations of Polish literature in Korea*, „Postscriptum Polonistyczne” nr 2(6), s. 67–83 (*Postscriptum Polonistyczne, vol 2(6), p. 67–83*).

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