

# On New Travel Literature and Central Europe as a Blank Space: Notes on Olga Tokarczuk's Novel *Bieguni* and Her Lecture Series in Japan

Hikaru Ogura

“The phantom with the name ‘Central Europe’ that appears in literature—does Central European literature exist?” (*Fantom Europy Środkowej przegląda się w literaturze. Czy istnieje powieść środkowo-europejska?*) published here is a lecture manuscript by Olga Tokarczuk, a contemporary Polish writer.<sup>1</sup>

In early 2012, we considered the advisability of inviting Polish writer Olga Tokarczuk to deliver a lecture in Japan as part of a research project investigating the image of the “East” in Eastern European literature. When inviting Tokarczuk to deliver a lecture, I asked her several questions: “East, Eastern Europe, boundaries—to you, just where (or what) does ‘East’ refer to? The Soviet Union? Or perhaps memories of the communist era? I would be happy if you could discuss *Bieguni*, as well. After all, the title of the novel is associated with a Russian Orthodox sect, and one episode (in the book) takes place in Moscow. Or, since

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<sup>1</sup> Olga Tokarczuk's lecture with the same title was delivered on March 1, 2013, at Rikkyo University (Tokyo) and on March 3, 2013, at Doshisha University (Kyoto). This series of lectures was organized by Hikaru Ogura with the financial support of the Slavic Research Center (now the Slavic-Eurasian Research Center) of Hokkaido University and JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 24320064.

you are familiar with Buddhism and Eastern philosophy, could not Japan be said to be a ‘far, near’ East?”

We received Tokarczuk’s long-awaited lecture manuscript in mid-February of 2013, as her visit to Japan approached. Interestingly, the term “Eastern Europe” could not be found anywhere in the manuscript. Instead, the manuscript described the author’s literary experiences with “Central Europe.” In other words, it was by her clear self-identification as a writer from “Central Europe” rather than from “Eastern Europe” that she had deftly answered my question about “what is ‘Eastern’?”

Tokarczuk states that the region referred to as “Central Europe”—situated between Russia and Western Europe (with any sense of a separate “Eastern Europe” omitted)—is a “belt of unknown belonging” and an intersection of Western and Eastern influences; more than a location that actually exists, “Central Europe” rather resembles a relative concept which, like an illusion, cannot be grasped simply by its essence. Even if we were to regard Central Europe as an entity in itself when referring to its experiences with communism, we would find that, at a glance, it shares many characteristics with communist Russia; however, in reality, there are many variations both within and between the countries, and treating them both as a unified whole is therefore largely meaningless.

However, there is at least one realm in which this concept of Central Europe takes on significant meaning: nothing shoulders “Central European” characteristics to such a great extent as does literature. Central European literature somewhat resembles a mushroom. Tokarczuk refers to “the organism that began to grow on top of the things that were slowly dying, that is, the solid and predictable world that met its demise at the outbreak of the First World War.” This new world was one where stories progressed only by connections between chance and circumstance, something extremely unrealistic. This is because reality/history has always deceived people. That Central European literature frequently possesses the aim of “the journey toward the inside” (*podróż do wnętrza siebie*) can also be understood in light of this type of observation. This perspective is based on the belief that “what is visible in reality is the manifestation of chaos, as the system in the underground called ‘interior.’” Tokarczuk states, “in the suddenly completed form, there is literally nothing that is given. What are put into people’s hands are semi-processed goods from which reality must be cooked.”

## On *Bieguni*

Prior to Tokarczuk's visit to Japan, I was preparing for the Japanese translation and publication of her novel *Bieguni* ("Runners") (2007). Tokarczuk was aware of this and wrote her lecture manuscript in concordance with the ideas and themes raised in *Bieguni*. Therefore, the two texts complement each other to a certain extent.

*Bieguni* comprises 116 passages, and the common motif running through them is "journey." The journey has been a principal motif in literature since time immemorial. In myths, legends, and scripture, people are constantly traveling. Moreover, if exile literature is regarded as a variant of travel literature, then this genre has a peculiar, complex genealogy in Poland. Under the Polish communist regime, individuals were not allowed to travel as freely as they are today, and the journey of the literary person was therefore charged with unique meaning.

Today, just over a quarter of a century after the revolutions of 1989, people have the freedom to embark on journeys, and this has been fairly commonplace for a long time even on the Eastern Block. The phenomenon of exile does not exist in its former form, and Poland is now a member of the European Union. *Bieguni* is a novel set in the current era, when travel is commonplace for all Poles.

Tokarczuk had not decided on a title for her novel for a long time after she started writing it. At that time, she had the opportunity to travel to Moscow, and during the course of her journey, Cezary Wodziński, a Polish philosopher and fellow traveler, told her about a Russian Orthodox sect. She learned about their creed, in which stillness is thought to be evil, and continual movement is thought to show faith in God; for Tokarczuk, this symbolized the concept of her literary work in progress, and she thus decided on the name of this sect as the title for her novel.<sup>2</sup> In terms of background, seventeenth century Russia was the age of the Reformation. However, there was a group called the Old Believers who rejected the Reformation and adhered to their traditional ceremonies; this

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<sup>2</sup> This episode was narrated by Tokarczuk herself at the workshop of the 2nd World Congress of Translators of Polish Literature in Kraków, June 4, 2009.

group was harshly persecuted by the Church and the regime of Peter the Great, who attempted to radically westernize the country. The Old Believers, for their part, used to refer to Peter as the Anti-Christ. The Runners (*Bieguni*) were one of the countless sects of Old Believers and were thought to have come into existence in the mid-eighteenth century. The ideas at the very base of the sect's doctrine are "thorough insubordination to political forces" and "complete denial of private property and inequality." They completely severed their ties to the society ruled by Peter the Great, and they came to believe that the only correct way to live was to wander, to escape to secluded forests and the wilderness.

There is a sort of continuity to the stories Tokarczuk heard from the philosopher in Moscow to the present. The Runners exist even today, and it is said that if one so desires, one can meet them. For instance, they often find the cars of the Moscow subway to be an ideal resting place: when they board the subway, it is sometimes for no other reason than to "rest while moving"; thus, riding the Moscow subway for prolonged periods of time becomes a kind of metaphysical experience. In Tokarczuk's novel, the members of this living sect also ride the subway in the present day, as our mirror image, personifying the obsessions tormenting modern people ("Bieguni" from *Bieguni*).

However, the story of the sect that lent its name to the book reflects only part of the novel, which contains many varying forms of journeys and destinations. The reader can also encounter journeys that are taken without even moving through "real" space.

In 1542, when Copernicus unveiled his model of the solar system and elucidated a mere fragment of the mysteries of the universe, the Italian anatomist Andreas Vesalius published the world's first anatomical atlas. Human beings were at once celestial or divine bodies as well as human bodies, and maps of the two were drawn at the same time. To fill in the blank spaces in the maps, two kinds of journeys began during that time. For instance, the part of the body that is called the Achilles tendon (*ścięgno Achillesa*) today was not known to exist before Philip Verheyen "discovered" it in the seventeenth century. At the time, the body was revealed as a topos to be explored and described ("Ściągno Achillesa" from *Bieguni*). Tokarczuk's novel contains a correspondence between such macro- and microcosmos, and the chain of images that represent

them are impressive. She intertwines images of wine, symbolizing the sacred blood of Christ, and menstrual blood, which was considered impure. Blood vessels are the rivers that flow through the body, and when, in the novel, the college professor dies from a blow to the head, his blood becomes an ocean that floods the brain/world and completely covers everything (“Kairos” from *Bieguni*).

On the other hand, as science improved on techniques for conducting human autopsies, the body also became a more secularized substance. The anatomist Frederik Ruysch, a contemporary of Verheyen, mounted exhibitions of dead things, which he called “the anatomy showroom.” He is said to have arranged human innards in the shapes of trees and shrubs, placing preserved human fetuses on the top. Although Ruysch displayed viscera as “things,” these strange *objets* evoked reflections on the idea of *memento mori* in spectators. Ruysch’s specimen collection eventually came into the possession of the Russian tsar, crossed the ocean, and became the cornerstone of the first museum in Russia—“Kunstkamera.” About 300 years later, anatomist Dr. Blau, a successor of Ruysch, became interested in the details of the human body and attempted to comprehensively explain its system of secrets. Dr. Blau drew a parallel between a packed suitcase and the human body, with its neatly placed internal organs. His specialty can be seen as one of man’s many attempts to penetrate the details of the human body, and he came up with a resin treatment for human organs and a plastination technique for semi-permanent preservation (“Podróże doktora Blaua” from *Bieguni*). Using his treatment, the processed organs can be removed from the body and viewed any number of times; in other words, it becomes the replicated, ubiquitous body, the body that does not decay. Such a state of existence is imbued upon the image of plastic bags from supermarkets, which have the same shape anywhere in the world (“O powstawaniu gatunków” from *Bieguni*).

## The Central European Style

The words “movement,” “mobility,” and “ubiquitousness” reveal the concept underlying *Bieguni*, and they overlap with the image of the body while underlying both the style and organization of the novel. To-

karczuk's favored method of composing a full-length novel by layering fragmentary sentences is in line with the theme of this work and is particularly successful.

According to Tokarczuk, this type of text is an extremely "Central European" phenomenon, and nothing other than history forms the basis of its special characteristics. This is because we are the products of history, and literature is always connected to historical time and processes.

In Western Europe, there is an understanding of history and historical continuity that differs from ours. What is important for our sensitivity is to receive such processes in a manner that differs from others. That process is not a chain, but full of holes and discontinuity, a flow of chaos where causes do not necessarily lead to effects. In the historical perception of Central Europe, there is a lot of random chance. That, in turn, is reflected in the writing of the novel. I can say that such a way of writing is the very closest to me. It is a completely different approach to storytelling. Such a narrative is scattered and non-linear and is revealed as a type of paradox. Chance itself is a driving force for events. I believe the preference for the fragmentary nature associated with the narratives of Central European writers is stronger than among writers in any other place.<sup>3</sup>

Literature is organically connected to the land where it was born. Therefore, the novels of Central Europe must not be swallowed by the wave of clarity that rules modern world literature, even if owing to such lack of clarity, the novels of Central Europe rarely become international bestsellers. Central European writers counter the advent of globalization led by English, with their own characteristic words in their own languages. After all, "language/the tongue (both *język* in Polish) is the strongest muscle in the body" ("*Najsilniejszym mięśniem człowieka jest język*" from *Bieguni*).

The phantom that is Central Europe is similar to the non-existent leg that causes phantom limb pain, discovered by Verheyen. It is a mysterious region that exists as "a blank space."

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3 Workshop at the 2nd World Congress of Translators of Polish Literature, June 4, 2009, Kraków. Originally in Polish.

However, here, a blank space is nothing more than a different way of saying “distrust of words.” There are certainly things in this world that cannot be completely told in words, because the experiences that occur in our world, to a large extent, are diverse and chaotic. Tokarczuk says, “I like constellations with an ambiguous meaning more than the orderly, elaborately written maps derived from one another’s arguments.” (“‘Central Europe’ appearing in literature—does Central European literature exist?”) Thus, there is no end to the quest, nor will the blank space ever be filled up.

Still, one thing that we can say with certainty is, “I am here” (“Jestem” from *Bieguni*), and that life is a series of chance meetings with someone else or something else, as if to say that “the purpose of a pilgrim is another pilgrimage” (“Celem pielgrzymki jest inny pielgrzym” from *Bieguni*). While the probability of any given encounter may be as low as that of an airplane passenger looking down from the window and locking eyes with someone on the ground looking up at the sky, at any rate, I exist (*jestem*) and must happen across something. Alternatively, this idea can be rephrased as follows: Even if the world can be thought to have no West or East and be traveled upon freely, people still have an objective—the quest for self. In this fluid, eternally changing, uncertain world, a person’s ‘self,’ that impermanent, fleeting ‘self,’ becomes the sole fixed point worth relying on in the middle of an unstable map. The only possible, single fixed point. When the destination “I” itself calls out that “I am here, so search for me!” it is secretly announcing its name. Therefore, *Bieguni* is not only a Central European-style travel narrative of journeys in a diverse world, but also of journeys into “me.”

In 2008, Tokarczuk was presented with the Nike Award—Poland’s most prestigious literary award—for *Bieguni*, which she wrote over a span of three years. She is popular both abroad and at home, and she herself is constantly traveling, much like the narrator in *Bieguni*. As her Japanese translator, I am secretly (now, not so secretly) hoping that her journey to Japan will one day find its way into a novel, as well.