How Not to Take Revenge on the Patriarchy: a Tender Reading of Olga Tokarczuk's Empuzjon

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I. INTRODUCTION

In 2024 Polish writer and activist Olga Tokarczuk's latest novel *Empuzjon* was translated into multiple European languages such as English, German, Dutch and French. Reviewers had been anxiously waiting to get their hands on the latest publication of the 2018 Nobel Laureate. Following her publication of *Bieguni* (*Flights*), the Nobel jury – impressed by her ecocritical, feminist and folklore-inspired angle – awarded her the prestige prize "for a narrative imagination that with encyclopaedic passion represents the crossing of boundaries as a form of life" ("Olga Tokarczuk – facts"). Transgressions of borders are central to all of Tokarczuk's works – at times more overtly such as in *Bieguni*, at other times more subtly. Excitement rose: which borders would Tokarczuk transgress in *Empuzjon,* and exactly how far would the author leave them in her rearview mirror? In the end, the reviews of *Empuzjon* ranged from expressions of disappointment to ragingly enthusiastic discussions of the novel.[1] However, all reviewers struggle to pinpoint the seemingly obvious relation to German author Thomas Mann's masterpiece *Der Zauberberg* (*The Magic Mountain*). Dutch reviewer Christiaan Weijts for *De Groene Amsterdammer* calls *Empuzjon* "een Poolse parodie op dit klassieke moment [i.e. *Der Zauberberg*]. *New York Times* reviewer Hari Kunru proposes a more nuanced relation, saying: "[a]ny Central European novel about a sanatorium is automatically in conversation with 'The Magic Mountain,' Thomas Mann's epic of stasis and suspended time (…)". On the other side of the spectrum, Sam Sacks for the *Wall Street Journal* calls *Empuzjon* "[p]art homage and part rejoinder". Parody, conversation, debt, homage, rejoinder, pastiche, answer; it seems Tokarczuk is once again crossing borders.[2]

Born in Sulechów, Poland, on 29 January 1962, Olga Nawoja Tokarczuk has been an acclaimed writer since her breakthrough in 1996 with *Prawiek I inne czasy* (*Primeval and Other Times*). In an interview organised by the Nobel Prize, Tokarczuk states that her background in clinical psychiatry has helped her to "listen to people", who according to her all carry "the source of a novel" (Nobel Prize, 03:59-05:19). As mentioned, an important theme in Tokarczuk's oeuvre is (the possibility of)

[1] Robert Rubsam in *Vulture* ponders freely whether Olga Tokarczuk "has (…) been struck by the Nobel Curse?" Ilma Rakusa for the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* could not agree less, when she writes: "Olga Tokarczuk versteht es meisterhaft, den Unheimlichkeitsgrad der Romanhandlung ständig zu erhöhen."
[2] In honour of Tokarczuk's love for the Polish language, I will be referring to Tokarczuk's novels in their original language. For the reader's sake, in this thesis I have based myself on the English translation of *Empuzjon* by Antonia Lloyd-Jones and the original German version of *Der Zauberberg.*

transgressing any kind of border, regardless of its (meta)physical, immaterial, or human qualities. Taking *Bieguni* (*Flights*) as an example, this work can be summarized as a complex web of 116 narrations of motion, travel and migration in any form. Underlying all these narratives is the thought that being stationary, or the pursuit of stability, can be more harmful than being in perpetual motion, whether physically or emotionally.[3] As such, Tokarczuk's work centres on the difficulties of transgressions, but also the potential gains they can offer to broaden one's horizon.

Similar to her bestseller *Prowadź swój pług przez kości umarłych* (*Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*), *Empuzjon* features a strange narrator, a focus on the inner worlds of non-human entities and an array of references to folklores. Protagonist of the story is 24-year-old Mieczysław Wojnicz, who travelled from his hometown Lwów to Görbersdorf to treat his tuberculosis in the local sanatorium. During his instalment in the Guest House for Gentleman, Wojnicz undergoes various treatments (of which drinking *Schwärmerei,* an alcoholic concoction of mushrooms, is a vital part) and makes acquaintance with, amongst others, Breslauer police detective Walter Frommer, Viennese philhellenic socialist August August and *notoire* traditionalist Longin Lukas. This motley crew converse throughout their days about the various patients at the sanatorium, dinner menus, world politics but, the novel explains, "whatever they had been talking about earlier, later on it was bound to come down to the same thing – women" (131). The latter topic is discussed by a particularly homogenous audience: a symposium consisting exclusively of men, far removed from society on an isolated mountain top. The absence of femininity is mirrored in Wojnicz's biography: his mother died during childbirth, his nanny Gliceria was confined to the kitchen quarters and the Sanatorium's groundkeeper's wife Mrs. Opitz (seemingly) commits suicide on the day of Wojnicz's arrival. However, unbeknownst to Wojnicz and the other male characters, the readers hear their stories through the narration of an unknown (and fairly untranslatable) feminine we-form, that forms a looming presence in the novel. These all-seeing and all-knowing presences raise the suspicion of having something to do with the yearly murder of a young man in the village each November. After all, the subtitle of *Empuzjon* is "A Health Resort Horror Story."

[3] E.g. the narrator of *Bieguni* reflects: "Am I doing the right thing telling stories? Wouldn't it be better to fasten the mind with a clip, tighten the reins and express myself not be means of stories and histories, but with the simplicity of a lecture, where in sentence after sentence a single thought gets clarified, and then others racked after onto it in the succeeding paragraphs?" (13).

The similarities to Thomas Mann's canonical work *Der Zauberberg,* published exactly one hundred years prior to *Empuzjon,* are undeniable. Hans Castorp, a young German engineer, visits his cousin at a tuberculosis sanatorium in Davos in the Swiss Alps for what was meant to be a three-week stay but which eventually lasts seven years. During his time at the sanatorium, he encounters various characters representing different philosophical and political worldviews, engaging in lengthy debates about life, death, time and European civilization on the eve of World War I. This seminal work explores themes of illness, education and the tension between reason and irrationality as Castorp undergoes a profound intellectual and spiritual transformation, isolated on a timeless mountain top.

An century has passed. Some concerns, like the incurability of tuberculosis, have largely lost their traction in the twenty-first century. However, as befits a canonical work like *Der Zauberberg,* themes such as the fascination with death, the concerning rise of nationalism, the role of culture in society fascinate readers to this very day. As can be seen in the reviews of *Empuzjon,* its likeness to *Der Zauberberg* immediately raises the question of how Tokarczuk approaches such an established work of fiction. On many occasions, Tokarczuk has stated her conflicting feelings about *Der Zauberberg.* On the one hand, she feels greatly inspired by this work and acknowledges Mann as a profound influence on her authorship. On the other, Tokarczuk has expressed an awkwardness about the outdated views presented in the novel, like the lack of dynamic female characters. In this thesis, I will examine the ways in which *Empuzjon* reflects on the precarity of literary influence: which themes are reiterated, which are undermined and which are supplemented? In this sense, the novel embeds itself in a larger discussion surrounding the process of canon formation, in which engagement with preceding canonical works plays a significant role. At present time, theories on literary influence and subsequently canon formation processes are firmly bound to the notion of violence. Literary scholars like Harold Bloom, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that violence is a fundamental criterium for admission into the literary canon. In her acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize, Tokarczuk proposes a different principle: tender narration. Through calling attention to "the dimension of the story that is the parable" (5), new narrative forms like the tender narrator will appear, that do justice to multivocal worldviews. Tokarczuk's poetics bring forth the question in what way this new poetic strategy provides an alternative, non-violent understanding of literary influence, and what the possible

consequences are for the contemporary canon formation process. Or in short: what insights can Olga Tokarczuk's tender engagement with canonical works such as Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg* in her most recent novel *Empuzjon* provide for a revaluation of the canon formation process?

In order to answer this question, I will first provide a theoretical framework, which discusses relevant mechanisms that contribute to canon formation. Central is the notion of literary influence, which tends to reiterate exclusionary, male-dominated ideologies. In the third and fourth chapter, I will first show how Tokarczuk uncovers stories from the archive that are often overlooked, such as the voices of women and non-human entities, and interweaves them with more traditional, canonical elements in *Empuzjon*. In the analysis, I will rely on the theories of post-colonial scholar Saidiya Hartman and ecocritical sociologist Bruno Latour. Based on this, the fifth, more theoretically oriented chapter will address the question how we can better understand Tokarczuk's concept of 'the tender narrator', which manifests itself in her storytelling practices in *Empuzjon*. I will argue that as a narrative approach 'the tender narrator' enables literary scholars and critics to reassess important theories on literary influence, which are predominantly build upon ideas of violent succession in the still male-dominated literary canon. In this chapter, I will also attempt to resolve an intriguing tension between Tokarczuk's poetics and the ending of her novel. This thesis will be concluded by a summary of the presented arguments, in which an answer will be formulated to the research question.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Already at a young age Tokarczuk realized that the world and everything in it can be viewed as an elaborate network of stories. To her surprise, however, dominant literary trends do not seek to represent such a holistic understanding of the world. Especially the exclusionary first-person narration is a thorn in Tokarczuk's side. In her acceptance speech for the Noble Prize in Literature on 7 December 2019, Olga Tokarczuk therefore proposes a solution: a 'tender' narrator. She states:

> "(…) this situation [i.e. the state of contemporary literature] is akin to a choir made up of soloists only, voices competing for attention, all traveling similar routes, drowning one another out. (…) [T]he readerly experience is incomplete and disappointing, as it turns out that expressing an authorial "self" hardly guarantees universality" (5).

A tender narrator, Tokarczuk explains, speaks in a plural form outside of time and space, can bring the thoughts of a teapot to life, and knows what God thought when He saw that it was good. Three years after this speech, Tokarczuk published *Empuzjon*. As introduced, her dialogue with other authors such as Thomas Mann, the combination of diverse genres such as horror, folklore, and theology, as well as her ability to develop unique narrators are in need of a new theoretical approach. To gain a better understanding of the ways in which Tokarczuk entangles marginalized stories with canonical narratives, it is important to first elaborate on the mechanisms of canon formation and to assess how historically the canon and the archive have been connected. In this theoretical framework, I will establish the foundations on which the analysis of relevant passages from the novel in the subsequent chapters will be build. It will become clear how the discourses on canon formation and literary influence are connected, and that the notion of violence as a means to secure a place within the canon is still prevalent.

2.1 The Canon and the Archive

The term 'canon' connotes a variety of quite abstract ideas: legitimacy, circularity, truth, hierarchy, even sacrality. As such, 'the canon' forms a difficult-to-grasp research object, but its effects on both literature and society are so profound that a critical examination of it nonetheless remains important. This section explores the relationship between the canon and the archive. Although it is difficult to give an exhaustive definition of these

terms, I rely on the insights of German literary scholar Aleida Assmann, who specializes in cultural memory. In *Canon and Archive* Assmann defines the relationship between canon and archive as follows: “I will refer to the actively circulated memory that keeps the past present as the canon and the passively stored memory that preserves the past past as the archive” (98). This broad definition, which encompasses more than literary canon formation, reveals important aspects for a critical examination of their relation. First of all, the role of active circulation hints at the importance of (literary) influence in the process of canon formation. Interactions, especially between authors, codetermine which works will be engaged with and consequently have a higher chance of being included in the canon. If works are not actively engaged with, or, in Assmann’s words, “have lost their immediate addressees; (…) are de-contextualized and disconnected from their former frames which had authorized them or determines their meaning” (99), they will be relegated to the archive. If uncovered in later times, these works are often more open to reinterpretation than canonized works, precisely because they have lost their former frames and are instead subjected to the logic of a particular archive.

Given that any process of literary canon formation is greatly determined by cultural and historical context, influential mechanisms such as literary norms and expectations, as well as sociopolitical circumstances should be taken into account. For the study of Tokarczuk’s engagement with canonical books such as Thomas Mann’s *Der Zauberberg,* as well as her attempt to recontextualize overlooked perspectives from the archive, it is important to determine what the prevalent notions are in the discourse surrounding European canon formation and literary influence. Since both Tokarczuk and Mann are heavily influenced by ancient Greek and Roman authors (as will be shown in the following chapters), the classical era makes for a logical starting point for a discussion of canon formation processes.

In its original definition canon, or κανών, is a measuring rod used by builders and mathematicians, but it quickly came to mean a ‘standard’. From Greek antiquity onwards educational, religious and national institutions compiled lists of works (objects, texts, immaterial heritage) against which new works could be contrasted and compared. Emerging poets underwent rigorous training that centred on canonical literary works. By engaging in translation, imitation, and emulation of established poets, these aspiring writers sought to penetrate the subtle complexities of masterful texts while simultaneously striving to carve out their own distinct place within the literary

tradition. A determining factor for canon formation was therefore based on whether the emerging poet had successfully displayed the influence of prior poets in his new work. For a considerable period, this conception of literary influence dominated canon formation in the Western literary landscape.[4]

However, in the mid to late eighteenth century, especially in the German context, a significant turn in conventions surrounding literary influence changed the process of canon formation. Romantic writers such as Goethe, Schiller and Schlegel opposed the restraining, hierarchical dictations of the dominant Classist movement by formulating an 'Autonomieästhetik'. As Schlegel explains in *Gespräche über die Poesie*, German literature, especially from medieval times onwards, can be placed on the same level of importance as classical texts. He argued that both literary traditions represented authentic expressions of their respective national spirits and should be equally valued in the literary canon (303). This development represents a crucial advancement in canon critique, as it challenges the hierarchical structure of canon formation and rejects antiquity as an inherent indicator of quality. Ironically, the benchmark for original artistic production in the Romantic era became the (often tormented) literary male genius, who was increasingly evaluated on his status as an outsider. The more literary influences could be discerned, the less a poet's claim to genius was considered authentic (Clayton & Rothstein 5). The meaning ascribed to individual men has heavily determined the image of the writer from this period onwards. This development intrinsically linked the idea of a 'genius' with the male gender.[5]

The idea of the literary genius was in turn heavily criticized by the historical avant-garde movements, such as Dada, Surrealism and Russian Constructivism a little over a century later. These modernist movements were especially sceptical about the 'autonomous' status of art, since these geniuses typically resided within bourgeois society. Influential authors such as Brecht, Valéry, and Frisch denounced the complex tension between artistic innovation and the institutional structures that played a significant role in transforming art into an exclusive practice, reserved for the elite.

[4] An additional definition of 'canon' is its usage in religious contexts as clerically sanctioned sacred texts. For an elaboration of this application of 'canon', see Gorak's *The Making of the Modern Canon,* 19-43.
[5] For an in-depth exploration of the historic rise of the 'genius', its exclusionary male-ness and its influence on our contemporary understanding of the author, I found Christine Battersby's *Gender and Genius: towards a feminist aesthetic* especially enlightening.

Bürger notes how values such as “Menschlichkeit, Freude, Wahrheit, Solidarität” were relegated to the realms of the artists (68). He identifies a contradictory result:

> “Sie [i.e. Romantic art] entwirft das Bild einer besseren Ordnung (…) Aber indem sie das Bild einer besseren Ordnung im Schein der Fiktion verwirklicht, entlastet sie die bestehende Gesellschaft vom Druck der auf Veränderung gerichteten Kräfte” (68).

Bürger therefore defines the era of the historical avant-gardists as the “Stadium der Selbstkritik” (28). In light of increasing societal tensions because of repressions (resulting in e.g. the Russian Revolution and the suffragette-movements throughout Europe), an important goal for many avant-gardists was to blur the boundaries between art and life. These artists would on the one hand refuse institutionalized art practices, ranging from rejecting classical influences to grounding new art collectives in response to institutions such as the authoritarian Paris Salon. However, instead of advocating for a more collaborative art practice with civilians, it was of equal importance to the avant-gardists to keep a significant distance from society to ensure a critical view on reality. Although the avant-gardists strongly opposed the idea of individuality, especially in the form of a (male) genius, the reception of their works and their artistic processes were glorified as truly original concepts, resulting in a exaltation of their individualism.[6]

Similar to the genius-aesthetic of the Romantic era, this understanding of the role of the poet equally contributes to the strong masculine overtones we see in modernist literary production and evaluation. An interesting result of this masculine dominance is noted by Alison Pease in her exploration of boredom in modernist literature. She notes that: “[f]eminist modernist texts, whether written by men or women, confront boredom as a problem originating out of the question of what it means to be a self in a culture shaped by masculine-defined individualism” (viii). Although Pease mainly focuses on the Anglo-Saxon contexts of this literary phenomenon, she explicitly mentions Thomas Mann’s *Der Zauberberg* as well. The conditions of

[6] To illustrate this point, Bürger takes Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* as an example. Bürger equates Duchamp’s signature as a manifesto against the individualistic production of art-works. He states: “Die Signatur, die gerade das Individuelle des Werks festhält, die Tatsache, daß es sich diesem Künstler verdankt – sie wird, dem beliebigen Massenprodukt aufgedrückt, zum Zeichen des Hohns gegenüber allen Ansprüchen individuellen Schöpfertums“ (70-71). Duchamp’s act of presenting these so-called “readymade” sculptures on the market likewise undermines the institution’s credibility. However, the admittance of these sculptures, including its signature, into art institutions such as museums or auction houses in their turn strip the sculptures of its intended meaning.

modernist canon formation can be summarized as an oscillation between the inclusion of public opinions, especially criticism of societal oppressive tactics, and its immediate self-criticism for its sluggish nature by e.g. thematizing a constant boredom.

Postmodernist literary theory reconceptualized canon formation even more radically. Thinkers like Lyotard rejected overarching explanatory systems, including the idea that certain works possess inherent, timeless value (such as Shakespeare).[7] More than modernist authors, postmodernists exposed how canons often privilege certain voices while marginalizing others. The second half of the twentieth century is marked by significant social movements, including the second wave of feminism, civil rights movements, the gay liberation movement and an increased attention for non-Western authors.[8] Initiated by the works of Julia Kristeva on intertextuality, postmodern authors began to understand their works as a network of references to other texts. This conception of literature was initially mobilized by the idea that originality was rendered completely impossible.[9] Everything had already been done and said before. Rewriting texts of any sort – from canonical works to brand logos to academic sources – has therefore often been identified as the 'literary device' of the postmodern author.[10] In these genre-transgressing works, many scholars identify a cynical tone that oscillates between rejection and appreciation of literary styles (Bertens and Fokkema 177). Since the postmodern era is characterized by the notion of cultural relativism, pinpointing delineating criteria for canon formation is challenging. Rather than reiterating supposed universal aesthetic values, postmodern authors suggest that different (sub)cultures ascribe meaning to a literary work based on local, personal or affective standards. But if value judgements are contingent rather than absolute, how realistic or even relevant is a singular canon then? Today, the heydays of postmodernism lay about half a century in the past. Despite postmodern authors' valuable contributions to dismantling universal aesthetic ideals, the majority emerge from privileged Western European

[7] An extensive overview of the shift in opinions on Shakespeare, especially in the postmodern era, can be found in 'Not of an Age, But for All Time: Canons and Postmodernism' by Stanley Fish.

[8] In *Postmodernism, Protest, and the New Social Movements* Joel F. Handler elaborates how deconstructivism – a key concept in postmodernist ideology – has influenced transformative politics. Handler argues that social movements such as environmental, feminist or gay liberation protests hinge upon similar notions of decentralizing structures, affective processes and protests from below.

[9] In *Einführung in die Neuere deutsche Literaturwissenschaft,* Jeßing and Köhnen characterize the underlying ideology of this era as "das Scheitern von Ich und Welt" (123), which led to a cynical stance against any reformulation of aesthetic values.

[10] The post-modern era is characterized by an incorporation of less acclaimed genres such as detective stories, fairy tales and science fiction. Examples include Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose,* Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogies* or Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale.*

contexts, which inevitably shapes their literary representation. A similar tension was remarked about the scholars evaluating and interpreting postmodern works. Especially post-colonial scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, warn for the concealment of structural injustice, when significance or meaning is determined by separate groups. The extensiveness and after-effects of colonial dominance for example transgress multiple group-defining boundaries such as class, race, gender and even time.[11]

Tokarczuk's timing of her Nobel Prize Speech isn't completely coincidental. In *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* cultural historian Jan Assmann reveals how canon formation is strongly influenced by periods of cultural upheaval in societies (127). During challenging times, a robust literary canon is often seen as providing reassurance, affirming both collective and individual identity through works that are immediately legible and familiar. Simultaneously, the canon provides a prescriptive function, offering guidance (Locher 32-33). Considering the rise of right-extremist thought in Europe, the ever more pressing climate crisis and a global tendency of reversing hard-won social rights, Tokarczuk's plea for a stable basis of stories to unite Europe cannot be called unintentional.[12] As mentioned before, Tokarczuk critically comments on individualism in the contemporary Western European literary world, and proposes a narrative approach to stimulate an interconnected worldview that includes both humans and non-humans. Whilst advocating for the retention of a singular (yet expanded) canon, Tokarczuk speaks of a worrying common denominator in the historical processes of canon formation. Namely, the formation and structure of a canon – from literary influence to literary circulation and reception – are despite criticism still inherently dependent on a homogenous group of authors, readers and evaluators. In other words: whilst acknowledging the benefit of a canon for society, Tokarczuk recognizes the troubling limitations of a Western dominated male-white-cis-human-coded canon, that has been challenged in varying ways by modernist, postmodernist authors and postcolonial authors.

[11] An important work to mention within this context is *Can the Subaltern Speak?* by Gayatri Spivak. This article asks whether marginalized voices can authentically be represented – or more accurately present themselves - within a postmodern framework.

[12] Tokarczuk herself has been targeted by right-wing political parties, accusing her of espionage, provocation and challenging Polish ideals. In 'The Landscape of Hate – Olga Tokarczuk in Populist Discourse in Poland', Dorota Kołodziejczyk discusses how Tokarczuk as an author has been utilized by right-wing populism to propagate the language of hate, war and othering.

With her novel *Empuzjon* Tokarczuk engages in this debate not just in a theoretical but also a literary way. As stated in the introduction, the aim of this thesis is to understand how Tokarczuk interacts with Mann's *Zauberberg*, while bringing perspectives Mann (and other canonical writers) have overlooked, to the surface again and reintegrating them in the main narrative. Significant about Tokarczuk's work is its radical departure from seminal ideas about the study of literary influence and canon formation, such as *The Anxiety of Influence* by Harold Bloom or *The Madwoman in the Attic* by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. Where these influential texts position violence as a fundamental mechanism of literary influence and canon formation, Tokarczuk introduces an entirely different paradigm through her concept of the 'tender narrator'. Below, I will first explore the argumentation of the abovementioned theorists. This will serve as a foundation to explore the new approach of the 'tender narrator' in relation to literary influence.

2.2 The Homogenous Poet

Harold Bloom: *The Anxiety of Influence*

The aim of *The Anxiety of Influence* by American literary theorist Harold Bloom is straightforward: "to de-idealize our accepted accounts of how one poet helps to form another" (5). According to Bloom, most literary historians before him had visualized influence as a top-down, heavenly (whether originating from actual divinity or from heaven dwellers) inspiration. With the publication of *The Anxiety of Influence* in 1973 this idea came to a screeching halt. Even though references to other literary scholars, modern or ancient, are scarcely found in his study, Bloom critically responds to the understanding of inspiration as "an ethereal fluid flowing in upon one from the starts, a fluid that affected one's character and destiny, and that altered all sublunary things" (26). Bloom's specialization in the Romantic poets of early nineteenth century England is prevalent in the authors he discusses. He argues that all poets are gripped by a feeling of belatedness, of being unable to contribute an original thought to the poetic landscape. Engaging with canonical predecessors is an immediate threat to their unprejudiced assession and to their originality in portraying the world (27). As such, Bloom states that aspiring poets operate in a continuous state of anxiety, afraid of "being flooded" (57). They can either succumb to the superiority of their precursors and worship them for eternity, amounting to, in Bloom's words, 'being weak' (19). Or they can (sub)consciously misread their sources of inspiration and metaphorically avenge

themselves by inserting themselves into the Western canon, i.e. 'be strong' (5). This way, Bloom presents his readers with a way to perform 'practical criticism', in which a literary text should be analysed by its misinterpretation of its precursors instead of understanding the text "as an entity in itself" (43).

Bloom's thoughts on intra-poetic relationships are heavily influenced by Freudian familial father-son relationships. He describes his theory of influence as a "[b]attle between strong equals, father and son as mighty opposites, Laius and Oedipus at the crossroads" (11). In accordance with the rest of Euripides' famous tragedy, the son/poet's only answer to overcome his jealousy felt towards his father/poet is to physically overpower him: a patricide in waiting. Such strong and gender-specific language characterizes *The Anxiety of Influence*. Exemplary for Bloom's theory and style is the following excerpt in which he equates the modern poet to the figure of Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost*: "The poet is our chosen man, and his consciousness of election comes as a curse; again, not "I am a fallen man," but "I am Man, and I am falling" – or rather "I *was* God, I *was* Man (for a poet they were the same), and I *am* falling, from myself" (20-1). It is unfathomable to Bloom that 'the poet' can be anything else but 'a man'. Therefore, he consistently uses the third person masculine to refer to the poet. Corresponding to his theory of canonical patricide, Bloom refers to Milton to illustrate the resentment and eventual revenge of the elected poet against his (dead) predecessor. This way, he successfully cements the relationship between literary influence and violent revenge in literary theory.

Sandra M. Gilbert & Susan Gubar: *The Madwoman in the Attic*

A poet is a father and a son, a pen is a penis, a sheet of white paper is a virgin, imagination is penetrative; the western literary tradition is riddled with masculine metaphors. American literary scholars Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar have compiled an extensive overview of how every attribute, physical or immaterial, of writing is eventually linked to manliness. Their 1979 study *The Madwoman in the Attic* poses a very direct question to Bloom's theory on Oedipal intra-poetic relationships published six years prior:

> "Bloom's model of literary history is intensely (even exclusively) male, and necessarily patriarchal. (…) Not only, after all, does Bloem describe literary history as the crucial warfare of fathers and sons, he sees Milton's fiercely

> masculine fallen Satan as the type of the poet in our culture (…). Where, then, does the female poet fit in?"(47).

In the same passage, Gilbert and Gubar stress that Harold Bloom, unlike other critics, has correctly identified the Western literary tradition as overwhelmingly male. According to the authors, he illuminates the a-priori assumption that every writer, poet, innovator is male, and that their poetics abide by a similar (masculine) logic. Conversely, for female authors there are no muses, influential predecessors are limited, and written works are "mere trifles designed to divert and distract readers in moments of idleness" (61). In a play on words, Gilbert and Gubar describe this lack of companionship and acknowledgement as 'the anxiety of authorship'. They explain how literary stereotypes of women as either 'chaste angels' or 'seductive monsters' has set an expectation of how women should behave in real life. They continue:

> "precisely because a woman is denied the autonomy – the subjectivity – that the pen represents, she is not only excluded from culture (whose emblem might well be the pen) but she also becomes herself an embodiment of just those extremes of mysterious and intransigent Otherness which culture confronts with worship or fear, love or loathing" (19).

A female author is 'unreadable' to society. Gilbert and Gubar examine the ways in which female authors have historically adapted to this hostile literary environment. Examples include the mirror-metaphor (15-17), male pseudonyms like George Elliot (65), or complete self-erasure through sickness (53-59).[13] These strategies may have serious consequences, as the authors explain:

> "(…) such self-denial may precipitate severe identity crises because the male impersonator begins to see herself as freakish – not wholesomely androgynous but unhealthily hermaphroditic. In addition, such self-denial may become even more than self-destructive when the female author finds herself creating works of fiction that subordinate other women by perpetuating a morality that sanctifies or vilifies all women into submission" (69).

[13] Gilbert and Gubar take Mary Elizabeth Coleridge's 'The Other Side of the Mirror'as an example, in which the author addresses her mirror-image (15-16). The author empathizes with her reflection, as she is imprisoned behind the glass with "no voice to speak her dread". The poem can be read as a lament of the poet's own lack of autonomy, both over her appearance as well as her experiences. Even in her own poem, the woman is spoken about instead of left to speak on her own.

How then do female authors navigate this anxiety of authorship? Gilbert and Gubar argue that to relate to their male predecessors and their archetypes, works by female authors are encoded to express their rage against the patriarchal system. They contend that the trope of 'the mad woman in the attic', as popularised by Charlote Brontë in *Jane Eyre*, is a haunting metaphorization of the author's own domestication, both in real life and in creativity. This female figure creeping through every nook and cranny of the home is eventually revealed to be "both the narrator and the narrator's double" (91). Female authors of the nineteenth century have repeated this unsettling and violent form of self-liberation and self-identification in countless forms. As such, this metaphor created a space for shared discomfort with and resistance against the male dominated literary world. In the end, Gilbert and Gubar affirm Bloom's theory of literary patricide, arguing that female authors must conform to this violent strategy to gain canonical recognition, by "almost obsessively [creating] characters who enact their own, covert authorial anger" (77). They conclude: "by projecting their rebellious impulses not into their heroines but into mad or monstrous women (who are suitably punished in the course of the novel or poem), female authors dramatize their own self-division, their desire both to accept the strictures of patriarchal society and to reject them" (78). While on the surface the violence remains legible to uninitiated (male) readers, deeper meanings stay hidden.[14]

The adaption of such strategies results into an inherently fragmented literary tradition of female authorship and renders a singular, inclusive canon impossible. Responding to Bloom's conception of literary influence as patricide, Gilbert and Gubar argue that female writers are forced to construct a shadow canon that interfaces with male-dominated literary structures. The authors maintain this theoretical stance in their more recent follow-up study from 2021 "Still Mad: American Women Writers and the Feminist Imagination". In summary, what is significant about Gilbert and Gubar's work is their identification of a distinctive pattern in the form of the 'mad woman' figure, which links the origins of independent female authorship in the nineteenth century to similar violent strategies as described by Bloom.

[14] The scope of this thesis does not allow for a nuanced evaluation of competent readership. I would like to include however this remark by Clayton and Rothstein: "The notion of literary competence, of course, introduces a highly variable factor into what is supposed to be a universally available interpretation, the effect of the differences in class, race, gender, and cultural heritage" (26).

In the next section of this theoretical framework, I will explore how Tokarczuk moves away from an understanding of literary influence as a violent practice. Through her narrative approach of 'the tender narrator', she both challenges Bloom's male-dominated, singular canon as well as Gilbert and Gubar's fragmented, yet hierarchical canon. As I will argue, tenderness allows for a change in perspective, that entangles canonical stories with marginalized or voiceless presences in the archive. This in turn establishes a dynamic conception of the canon as an interconnected network of stories, that does not require violence as a fundamental criterium for admission.

2.3 The Networked Poet

Tokarczuk takes an important step towards rethinking literary influence. Contrary to Bloom and Gubar and Gilbert's theories on violent narrative practices, she advocates for a 'tender narrator', which she describes as:

> "the art of personifying, of sharing feelings, and thus endlessly discovering similarities. Creating stories means constantly bringing things to life, giving an existence to all the tiny pieces of the world that are represented by human experiences, the situations people have endured and their memories. Tenderness personalizes everything to which it relates, making it possible to give it a voice, to give it the space and the time to come into existence, and to be expressed" (24).

Tenderness can overcome the limitations of canon formation in two distinctive ways, which I will explain by connecting Saidiya Hartman's approach of critical fabulation to Bruno Latour's Actor-Network-Theory. In the following paragraphs I will first introduce Hartman's concept of critical fabulation and its role in reconnecting the canon and the archive. According to her, even brief archival mentions of an individual constitutes proof of their existence – which can be re-imagined through critical reflection. As will become clear in the analysis, Tokarczuk employs similar techniques in *Empuzjon*. Next, I will build on Bruno Latour's Actor-Network-Theory to better understand how Tokarczuk not only brings previously unheard voices from the archive to the surface, but also expands our common understanding of the canon as a human-centred entity by including non-human presences. Keeping Tokarczuk's explanation of tenderness in mind, it will become clear that tenderness is the factor that connects humans and non-humans, without a sense of hierarchy.

Saidiya Hartman: 'Venus in Two Acts'

In *Empuzjon*, we read: "we are drawn to the cracks between the floorboards – and there we disappear" (20). The story is narrated in a second-person plural feminine form which is nearly untranslatable in English. In doing so, Tokarczuk invents a distant but looming presence that seems to come from the farthest and darkest corners of the archive. Before Tokarczuk, other authors as well as scholars have found ways to deal with the selective nature of archives and to creatively 'mend' these holes, bringing new stories and voices to the surface.

In 2008, for example, postcolonial scholar Saidiya Hartman faced a similar problem. Her article 'Venus in Two Acts' describes Hartman's research on the transatlantic slave trade, particularly the experience of enslaved black women.[15] Hartman was confronted with informational gaps and silences in the historical archives. To textualize these experiences and insert them into the historiography of these events, Hartman devised the concept of 'critical fabulation' as a methodological approach. A key aspect of critical fabulation is understanding narrative as theory. Hartman combines traditional historical research with critical imaginative work to "reconstruct" potentially accurate narratives of precarious lives that are only known through brief, violent mentions in ship logs or slaveholders' documentation. As such, critical fabulation responds to the presumed objectivity of historical archives and their power to either preserve or disregard information. This method also responds to the question of *how* we know what we claim to know about the past and ethically supplements existing narratives with probable plotlines. For Hartman, it is of critical importance to maintain a tension between what is known and what can only be imagined. The imagined biographies are never conclusive or redemptive stories, since that would obscure "the forms of violence licensed in the present" (13). Rather, she describes the aim as follows:

> "[b]y throwing into crisis "what happened when" and by exploiting the "transparency of sources" as fictions of history, I wanted to make visible the production of disposable lives (in the Atlantic slave trade and, as well, in the discipline of history), to describe "the resistance of the object", **if only by first**

[15] Originally this essay was published as part of her work *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2008).

> **imagining it**, and to listen for the mutters and oaths and cries of the commodity" (Hartman 11-12, my emphasis).

Tokarczuk shares the importance that is ascribed to imagining here, when she states in *The Tender Narrator* that "being imagined is the first stage of existence" (23). Existence – in any form – is sought out by Tokarczuk in *Empuzjon* by integrating female (and non-human) presences into the main story of Mieczysław Wojnicz. The ghostly atmosphere created in *Empuzjon* through the construction of a narrator that transcends individual thought, time and even grammar, echoes Hartman's sepulchral vocabulary. Both Hartman and Tokarczuk problematize harsh delineations between fact and fiction, suggesting that the main plot is always haunted by stories untold. As such, through Hartman's theory it will become clear how feminine presences from the archive are reinterpreted in *Empuzjon,* and what this reintegration tells us about how and what we remember.

There is an important distinction to note however. Hartman's ambition is to recreate "impossible stories" through critical fabulation and integrate their presence as part of "a black counter-historical project" (13). Similarly to Gilbert and Gubar, Hartman criticizes the violent mechanisms that relegate particular stories to the archive and subsequently constructs a different body of stories that centres around black, feminine presences. In Hartman's theory, canonical structures are understood as rigid and unchangeable. On the contrary, with the approach of the tender narrator, Tokarczuk acknowledges the existing structure of the canon and rather than discarding it, advocates for an understanding of the canon as a changeable concept. To Tokarczuk, such a delicate interaction between canon and archive, existing beyond physical presence, can foster a sense of interconnection among *all* worldly entities. In Tokarczuk's work, the reintegration of overlooked narratives range further than feminine presences. Therefore I will turn to Bruno Latour's Actor-Network-Theory to examine *Empuzjon* as a novel, that incorporates non-human presences as well. Through Latour's interconnected worldview, I will analyse how non-human presences are represented in *Empuzjon* and what the implications of such a wide-ranging perspective are for the reformulation of the canon.

Bruno Latour: 'Actor Network Theory'

By employing 'the tender narrator', Tokarczuk's aim is to find "the foundations of a new story that's universal, comprehensive, all-inclusive, rooted in nature, full of contexts

and at the same time understandable" (20). An influential contemporary thinker who shares this view was the French philosopher Bruno Latour. In works such as *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes*, *Face à Gaïa: Huit conférences sur le Nouveau Régime Climatique* and *Où atterrir? Comment s'orienter en politique*, Latour increasingly challenged the deep-rooted modern nature/culture divide, which has prevented humans from conceptualizing the ecological crisis as a shared predicament. In 1982 Latour, together with Michel Callon and John Law, presented a sociological approach to understand the world as a mutual web of dependency and interconnectedness. Rather than reiterating the presupposed dichotomy between humans and non-humans, Actor-Network-Theory, or ANT for short, focuses on meaningful translations, transformations, and connections between actors, which taken together form an elaborate and constantly evolving network. Accordingly, researchers following ANT aim to move away from hierarchical models of power in which only some actors, e.g. humans, impose meaning on 'passive' objects, animals, or other non-human entities. Latour himself, however, has often problematised the name of his theory, ironically stating: "I will start by saying that there are four things that do not work with actor-network-theory; the word actor, the word network, the word theory and the hyphen!" (15). When applying it to Tokarczuk's *Empuzjon*, however, ANT can shed light on both the incorporation of non-human presences from the archive into the main plot, as well as, on a meta-level, the interconnections between Tokarczuk and Mann.

Latour states that ANT should be understood as "a very crude method to learn from the actors without imposing on them an a priori definition of their world-building capacities" (20). In her article "Comparison and Translation", Australian literary scholar Rita Felski summarizes ANT as a "close-up (myopic) investigation, exhaustive (workaholic) description, and close to the ground (trail-sniffing) analysis" (748). And 'close to the ground' is exactly the viewpoint from where the we-narrators of *Empuzjon* unfold the plot: "[h]ere we are watching them, as usual from below, we see them like big strong columns topped by small chattering projections – their heads" (125). To counter a top-down perspective, Tokarczuk attempts to describe the world in an inclusionary we-form which originates from below, from the Earth. This methodological approach does not come without its limitations, as Donna Haraway's words remind us in her 1988 essay "Situated Knowledges":

> "I would like to insist on the embodied nature of all vision and so reclaim the sensory system that has been used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere. (…) Vision in this technological feast becomes unregulated gluttony; all seems not just mythically about the god trick of seeing everything from nowhere, but to have put the myth into ordinary practice. And like the god trick, this eye fucks the world to make techno-monsters" (581).

The unreliability of human representation of non-human entities has not gone unnoticed by Tokarczuk. In an interview with Antonia Lloyd-Jones for *The Literary Hub*, the author acknowledges: "We can't imagine what the world is like from the viewpoint of a grasshopper or a shoal of fish, or even a dog." Consequently, one of the central themes of *Empuzjon* is (distorted) perception and the corporeal boundaries that enable or restrict our awareness of others. As will be shown more elaboratively in the analysis, Tokarczuk demonstrates how human perception is always co-dependent on other entities. Latour's ANT will be helpful in answering the question how Tokarczuk imagines the (limitations of the) body to represent multiple perspectives as accurately as possible, and in the process to find surprising similarities between diverse entities, both human and non-human. To better understand this, ANT's concept of translation is helpful. ANT revolves around the notion of translation, defined here as the constant exchange, broadcasting and interpretation of meaning between entities. The process of translation takes place in a multifaceted network, where experiences of seeing and interpreting are in constant dialogue with other entities.

I want to argue that the premise of ANT that processes and knowledge systems emerge through intricate interactions within a network where agency is distributed both among non-human and human actors could transform the dominant understanding of literary influence. Through the lens of ANT, a comparative analysis of literary works or authors shifts from a hierarchical assessment of literary influence to an understanding of their engagement as a process of meaning translation within a larger network. This reconceptualized approach to comparative analysis opens up possibilities for envisioning literary influence beyond violent competition as described by Harold Bloom, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. Rather than authors battling for prominence, they participate in a constantly transforming literary network where influence flows and is transformed through multidirectional relationships.

Tokarczuk concludes her speech on tender narration with the following words:

> “That is why I believe I must tell stories as if the world were a living, single entity, constantly forming before our eyes, and as if we were a small and at the same time powerful part of it” (25).

The tender narrator, as formulated by Tokarczuk, can position itself to present the world as a “single entity” which is simultaneously “constantly forming”. An interplay between structure and movement is often thematized in Tokarczuk’s work. She constantly undermines the expectations of her readers because she knows they will fall back on recognizable literary structures, creating an opening for surprising connections. On a theoretical level, these key concepts can elucidate the relationship between the stability of the canon and the changeability of the archive as well. In the following two chapters, I will analyse how Tokarczuk tests the boundaries of literary structural elements – namely the title, genre classification and narration – and how she brings feminine and non-human perspectives back to the surface of the main narration. This analysis will lay the groundwork for the final chapter’s theoretical presentation of the tender narrator and the comprehensive interpretation of the final passage of the novel.

III. THE CANON

The novel revolves around Mieczysław Wojnicz, a 24-year-old Polish student of hydroengineering and sewage systems. As a last resort to treat his tuberculosis, Wojnicz Sr. sends his son to the Brehmer Sanatorium in Görbersdorf, Silesia. Besides undergoing the occasional treatment, he spends his days conversing with other inhabitants at the Guesthouse for Gentleman. Mieczysław eventually learns from a fellow patient, Thilo Von Hahn, about a disturbing local pattern: each November a young man in Görbersdorf meets a gruesome fate. As the story unfolds, the readers increasingly wonder what the narrators' involvement in these deaths is. When Thilo dies in September after his condition quickly worsened, Wojnicz emerges as the apparent next victim.

Before close-reading relevant passages of tender narration in *Empuzjon,* I want to include an important consideration made by Tokarczuk in *The Tender Narrator.* "Could there be a story," the author wonders, "that would go beyond the uncommunicative prison of one's own self, revealing a greater range of reality and showing the mutual connections", while simultaneously keeping "distance from the well-trodden, obvious and unoriginal center point of commonly shared opinions?" (20) In other words, Tokarczuk asks her audience: what would a transformation from a rigid, highly structured and at times oppressive literary canon into a volatile, non-hierarchical network of interconnected stories entail?

The narrative setting of Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg* in which Tokarczuk inscribes herself seems to revolve around binary oppositions: health vs. sickness, men vs. women, humans vs. animals, culture vs. nature, life vs. death.[16] As an author who was praised by the Noble-jurors for representing "the crossing of boundaries as a form of life", Tokarczuk questions the validity of these dichotomies ("Prize announcement" 1:23-1:25). In a recent study of her work, Konrad Werner concluded that characteristic for Tokarczuk's oeuvre is a "tension, but also the intimate bond, which exists between stability and structuredness, on the one hand, and the power of change, movement and transgression, on the other" (437). In her book *Bieguni*, for example, Tokarczuk

[16] The "fröhliche Apokalypse" is how Austrian writer Hermann Broch nicknamed the last decades of the Austrian-Hungarian empire. It was the high times of male-dominated philosophy in which Sigmund Freud and Ludwig Wittgenstein thrived but also of woman's emancipation movements, of high mortality rates caused by tuberculosis and simultaneously of its glorification as 'the artist's disease', of the peak of modernity and of the prelude to global warfare (Schwartz *3*).

thematizes the concept of travel in this light: travel both hinges on structures such as destinations, vehicles and linear paths, but of course also on movement, sideroads and unexpected turns.[17] I build on this idea of opposition and mutual dependency between structure and movement, but relate these terms to canon on the one hand and archive on the other. The way in which these concepts are thematized in *Empuzjon* can lead to a more inclusive understanding of the relationship between canon and archive. In turn, this forms the basis for a revaluation of the canon formation process, in which criteria such as literary influence do not rely on violent interaction.

It is a challenge to accurately define 'structure' and 'movement' without relying on, as Werner phrases it, "a more intuitive chord" (439). The OED defines 'structure' as "the arrangement and organization of mutually connected and dependent elements in a system or construct". Even though this definition presents 'structure' as a neutral concept, Werner makes the important point that the term is often misused in dangerous rhetoric. The term can be appropriated to suggest that "the whole universe may be regarded as the real of logos – a rationally-organized complex governed by some "idea," "plan" or "thought" (440). Therefore, it is more advantageous to examine the preferred outcomes of a specific structure. Werner points to a human need for structures as a means "to generate wealth, to innovate, (…), most generally, to make the world more predictable" and "to seek safety through stability" (440). Arguably, similar mechanisms are at work in the formation of a canon: it is designed as an organisational structure that legitimizes literary practices, cultural expressions and the collective memory of a certain social group.[18] On the one hand, *Empuzjon* is an illustrative example of how structures can be useful. It shows how recognizable elements strengthen connections to preceding literary traditions.[19] As discussed in the theoretical framework to this thesis, the process of inscribing yourself into the contemporary literary canon is dependent on a certain recognition effect, i.e. adhering to a literary tradition, genre, or values, while at the same time offering readers a sense of originality.[20] Tokarczuk herself has pointed to the need for a canon as a structure

[17] For an elaborate analysis of *Bieguni,* see Werner*,* 'Tension Between Embodied Structures and the Pursuit of Change: Exploring the Metaphysical Underpinnings of Olga Tokarczuk's Flights'*.* Nielipowicz discusses *Prowadź swój pług przez kości umarłych* in a similar vein in her work, 'Between Tenderness and Anger. Oscillation in Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead by Olga Tokarczuk'.
[18] Assmann, 100.
[19] In this case, Thomas Mann.
[20] See Jeßing and Köhnen's definition of 'Kanon' for a comprehensive yet compact discussion of the relation between the canon, literary evaluation and relevant actors (6-7).

that can provide a certain sense of stability.[21] However, as soon as she seemingly subscribes to the conventions of a certain structure in her novel, whether that is replicating the setting of the canonical *Der Zauberberg* or the genre of the 'horror story', Tokarczuk transgresses its boundaries. Interestingly, rather than simply pointing out the limitations of a certain structure, she presses for a more open playing field, in which structures are seen as jumping boards for movement. The leeway can be found in the archive: which perspectives are not represented, if one focuses their attention on them? For Tokarczuk structure and change are two sides of the same coin, that equally contribute to the process of canon formation.

In the following two chapters, I will discuss the relationship between canon and archive, as they are represented in *Empuzjon* through the thematization of structure and movement. Tokarczuk uses conventional structural elements in her novel such as the title, the genre and the narration to motive the readers to fall back on recognizable patterns and expectations. She, however, immediately questions the boundaries of these seemingly rigid structures. By incorporating other perspectives, Tokarczuk – I will argue – undermines the idea of a canon as a male, homogenous and individualistic structure, and expands it from a static to a pliable concept. After an analysis of the structural elements in *Empuzjon,* I will examine how Tokarczuk's resurfaces perspectives from the archive to entangle these with canonical elements. Concretely I will turn to Saidiya Hartman's methodological approach of critical fabulation to examine the female characters in *Empuzjon* and their brief and violent descriptions. With the help of Bruno Latour's Actor-Network-Theory I will then also discuss the inclusion of non-human presences from the archive into the main narration of *Empuzjon.*

Tokarczuk's core message ultimately concerns perspective – how we choose to view and navigate the fundamental tension and mutual dependency between structure and movement. Central to this is tender narration, which refuses binary distinctions, hierarchies and a straightforward reading of the relationship between canon and archive. This constitutes the basis for analysing the complex relationship between the role of tenderness and violence in Tokarczuk's novel, which will be the topic of the final chapter of this thesis. Here, I will return to the question how to harmonize the triumph

[21] In *The Tender Narrator,* Tokarczuk defines literature as "a field for the exchange of experience (…), a democratic space" (5). According to her, the apathy humankind feels towards major global crises is caused by a lack of "points of view, metaphors, myths and new fables" (3) that produce viable "imaginaries of the future" (3).

of violence and retribution at the end of the novel with Tokarczuk's inclusive and 'tender' poetics.

3.1 Title

It seems fitting to begin the analysis of *Empuzjon* with its title. *Empuzjon* in Polish, *The Empusium* in English, *Empusion* in German and Dutch, *Empúsio* in Portuguese; Tokarczuk's neologism is kept in place in almost all European translations.[22] The title is a compound of two Greek words, namely symposium (συμπόσιον) and Empusa (Ἔμπουσα). 'Symposium' is commonly defined as a "meal hosted by private individuals (…) [that is] conducted according to strict rules [in] the banqueting hall, the andrṓn ('men's room') and is a motivating force in social intercourse and even in solidarity in political life" ("Banquet*",* def. c. symposia). It is also the title of the most popular work of Greek philosopher Plato. Noteworthy is the work of German literary scholar K. Ludwig Pfeiffer, who examines the modern desire for such gatherings through a reconceptualization of the symposium. He defines the pastimes at ancient symposia as a mixture between cultural games, performances and profound conversation, both personal and political. As such, "[t]he Athens symposium preserved its privileged position because, in the absence of sweeping claims, it managed and exemplified informally both bothersome questions of self-recruitment and the transition from a smaller sympotic-sociable group to social relevance within a much larger society" (Pfeiffer 14). Although Pfeiffer calls for a return to the symposium as an activity in the twenty-first century, the author himself point out that his definition of the symposium excludes women.[23] Within academia the dispute surrounding the presence of women during ancient symposia has long died out, but Pfeiffer's recent publication exemplifies how the understanding of symposia as homogenous, male-dominated events is still very much alive. He even wields an Aristotelian definition of humankind, the homo

[22] The deviating titels are *Tierra de empusas* in Spanish and *Le Banquet des empouses* in French. The latter translation dismisses the second component in the compound, but does arguably capture the essence of the title.

[23] There is enough evidence to prove the presence of 'hetairai', female courtesans, during symposia, see e.g. Stiehle's work *Performance and Gender in Ancient Greece,* esp. chapter five on symposia. Furthermore in the last decades, scholars have attempted to research (undocumented) female presence at the symposium itself and female influence on the banquet from the outside quarters such as the family home or public spaces. Examples include Corner's 'Did 'Respectable' Women Attend Symposia?' or Burton's 'Women's Commensality in the Ancient Greek World'.

polis, throughout his work, unconcerned about the fact that women and other marginalized groups were not considered as part of the *polis*.[24]

I now turn to the first part of the word 'Empus/z', which might be less well-known. An 'Empusa' is a female-being in Greek mythology, most exhaustively described in Aristophanes' play *Frogs.* In this following scene, the god of wine Dionysus and his slave Xanthias are about to embark on a trip to the Underworld, when they encounter an Empusa.

Ξανθίας δεινόν: παντοδαπὸν γοῦν γίγνεται μέν γε βοῦς, νυνὶ δ᾽ ὀρεύς, τοτὲ δ᾽ αὖ γυνὴ ὡραιοτάτη τις. **Διόνυσος** ποῦ 'στι; φέρ᾽ ἐπ᾽ αὐτὴν ἴω. **Ξανθίας** ἀλλ᾽ οὐκέτ᾽ αὖ γυνή 'στιν, ἀλλ᾽ ἤδη κύων. **Διόνυσος** Ἔμπουσα τοίνυν ἐστί. Aris. *Fro.* 285-296	**Xanthias** 'Terrifying. And it keeps changing: it's a bull, no, it's a mule, and now it's a woman. And what a beauty!' **Dionysus:** 'Where is she? Let me at her' **Xanthias:** 'The woman's gone, she's changed into a dog.' **Dionysus:** 'So it's Empusa!' Tokarczuk 101-103

In Greek mythology, the Empusa is described as a shapeshifting figure, typically with one leg of copper and the other one made out of cow dung. She is closely associated with witchery, especially Hekate, the chthonic Greek goddess of crossroads. Tokarczuk's combination of 'Empusa' and 'symposium' thus creates a highly gendered tension. It eliminates the a-priori assumption of a symposium as a male-dominated gathering, while simultaneously entangling this specific activity with a strong mythical femininity.

Three years prior to the publication of *Empuzjon,* Tokarczuk called attention to the systematic oversight of female authors and characters in art in the interview accompanying her awarding of the Nobel Prize. In response to the question of how women's voices can be resounded in literature, she said:

[24] Pointedly put by Arlon Saxonhouse: "The male, who heads the household of which the female is part, transcend the family to become a participant in the political word. In the life of classical Greece the *polites,* initially a member of the family, finds his fulfillment in the life of the community. For the women there is no fulfillment outside the family" (65).

> "[o]nce I wrote a book about three womens (sic) (…) By the Polish critics this book was described as a saga. So I was so disappointed, because when they realised that the main characters are women and the author is women (sic), it must be a saga. So sometimes I think we need not only female writing but also creating the female characters in literature as a philosophical ethical subject (…) Because we when we are thinking about (…) a human being we still have somewhere in the back of our minds a man, the figure of man. So this one is very important, this should be changed" (11:41-13:13).

Tokarczuk's disappointment here is not caused by the reviewers categorizing her novel as a female-connoted saga, but rather by their assumption that the gender of the author and the characters diminishes the story's ability to offer meaningful commentary on reality. Socrates' guests, conversely, by the grace of their gender are able to analyse the deplorable state of Athenian life, define love and give meaning to contemporary forms of art, prompting its readers to interpret the work analogously to the real world. Since the physical spaces in which they convene – ranging from the banquet hall, the (political centre of the) agora, to the polis – actively exclude female presence, their insights are taken as universally valid, which is not the case for female authors and characters. However, by merging the spheres of the symposium and the Empusa in the title of her novel, Tokarczuk emphasizes that a continuation of understanding literary production, whether at symposia or in the canon, as a traditionally male-coded space is inherently erroneous. From the very beginning, Tokarczuk provides her readers with a illustrative example of how a structural element such as the title can be interwoven with systematically overlooked presences. She immediately demonstrates that homogeneity is an unproductive starting point for rethinking mechanisms and criteria for canon formation.

3.2 Genre

The subtitle 'A Health Resort Horror Story' adorns the covers of *Empuzjon*.[25] A bold move for an author who states:

[25] In the German, Polish and French translations, the subtitles are printed on the cover as well, respectively reading *Eine natur(un)heilkundliche Schauergeschichte*, *Horror przyrodoleczniczy*, *Roman d'épouvante naturopathique*. The subtitle does not appear on the cover of the Dutch version, but the novel is marketed as *Empuzjon: Een natuurgeneeskundig griezelverhaal.* The Spanish translation did not include a subtitle at all.

> "The division into genres is the result of the commercialization of literature as a whole and an effect of treating it as a product for sale with the whole philosophy of branding and targeting and other, similar inventions of contemporary capitalism." (*The Tender Narrator* 7)

Genre, as defined by David Duff in *Modern Genre Theory,* is "a recurring type or category of text, as defined by structural, thematic and/or functional criteria" and is "increasingly used in the classification of non-literary (and non-written) as well as literary texts" (xiii). Duff connects genre classification to canonization, because it provides a genre with "cultural recognition or prestige" and "a position of influence or dominance over other genres" (x). Since postmodernism, however, the hierarchization of genres has been increasingly called into question, with many scholars concluding that 'genre' should be considered a dynamic system rather than a strict categorization (Duff 15-19).[26] As such, Tokarczuk positions herself in a contemporary understanding of genre as a dynamic rather than a static concept, which refuses easy categorization and at times spontaneously creates novice (sub)genres.[27]

While scholars debate the specific conventions of the horror genre, there is a consensus around one essential yet subjective qualification: the narrative must invoke fear.[28] Fear is great stimulus for transmitting a moralizing lesson about societal norms and values to a larger audience.[29] Writing about the genre classification of *Empuzjon,* literary critic Robert Rubsam of *Vulture* makes an important observation about how the narrative can evoke fear, stating: "[h]orror stories are often about the disjuncture between appearances and depths and turn on a change in perception: the genteel aristocrat who is in fact a monster, the idyllic town that conceals a dark secret."

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[26] Notable works in the debate surrounding genre are 'The Law of Genre' by Jacques Derrida, 'Transformations of Genre' by Alastair Fowler and 'Genre and Gender' by Mary Eagleton. These three works specifically concern themselves with the following question: does the narrative impose the genre, or does the genre limit the narrative?

[27] It is interesting to note that the development of genre theory is closely linked to academic discourse on canon formation. In *Modern Genre Theory,* David Duff places the origins of genre theory in the German Romantic Movement as well. Ideas of expanded canons and the dissolvement of literary hierarchies, in response to the doctrine of the neo-classical era, highly influenced the debate about genre classification.

[28] This is the premise on which the extensive overview *Horror Literature from Gothic to Post-Modern: Critical Essays* edited by Michele Brittany and Nicholas Diak is build. In the introduction of this work, fear as a criterium for the horror genre is elaborated on.

[29] For example, in 1989 Mundorf, Weaver and Zillman presented one of the first quantitative studies on the affective reactions to gender stereotypes in contemporary horror films. According to them, based on the considerable impact gender-affirming characters have on the subject's self-perception, horror movies can be said to have a socializing effect (671).

The reader is forced to distrust their own senses and question the intentions – or even nature – of every (seemingly) human character they encounter. This is in line with Stephen Prince, who narrows down the definition of fear in horror narratives to anxiety surrounding "the nature of human being" (8). Prince notes: "[w]ithin the terrain of horror, the state of being human is fundamentally uncertain. It is far from clear, far from being strongly and enduringly defined. People in the genre are forever shading over into nonhuman categories" (2).[30] In other words, the fear of the non-human is manipulated in the horror genre to educate the readers about what it means in fact to be human. Paired with a fair amount of violence – a reoccurring theme in this particular genre as well – a successful horror story entails a non-human entity that, at first glance, appears to conform to established social norms. However, this entity harbours a hidden, more authentic self, which is revealed to the reader through a shift in perspective. Prince concludes that such a figure is a "violation of the ontological categories on which being and culture resides"(2). In my reading of Tokarczuk, the author uses this convention not to reinforce genre expectations, but to disrupt them and challenge the notion of an anthropocentric canon.

A relevant passage in the novel to illustrate this is the passage in which Thilo Von Hahn guides Mieczysław into different ways of viewing, an essential theme in any successful horror story. Thilo introduces him to an optical illusion, in which cubes seem to move out of nowhere when one strains their eyes. Their attention is then turned to the painting 'Landscape with the Offering of Isaac' by the Flemish Painter Henri met de Bles, that Thilo has taken from his family's collection.

> "'That's Abraham. And there's Isaac. Any fool would recognize it,' said Wojnicz, sure of himself. 'The people don't matter. Narrow your eyes.' Mieczysław smiled hesitantly. He looked once, and again. He was expecting to see movement in the picture, as in the case of the cubes that had suddenly started to dance, but here there was nothing going on. 'Look, don't jabber,' Thilo admonished him"(198).

Thilo Von Hahn effectively demonstrates here how genre conventions can limit the perception of the viewer. Mieczysław's focus immediately goes out to the familiar

[30] H. P. Lovecraft, one of the most canonical horror-writers of all time, explains the intrinsic appeal of the horror genre. He argues that strange fiction has been around since the beginning of time, because "the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown" (12).

figures of Abraham and Isaac, of whom he interprets every gesture, facial expression and placement in the painting. The Abraham and Isaac story represents one of the earliest examples of a canonical plot in the literal sense, as biblical texts were designated as "canon" before this terminology was adopted within literary studies. When Thilo exclaims that “people don’t matter”, Mieczysław’s attention is then caught by an entirely different aspect of the painting, namely its landscape. In this passage, Tokarczuk first makes us focus on the familiar structures of the depicted story and the materiality of the painting, but after an encouragement to change perspectives, showcases the narrative’s highly interpretable surroundings and its connections to change and movement.

Genres are typically perceived as binding forces, or as American literary scholar David Duff puts it: “the term seems almost by definition to deny the autonomy of the author, deny the uniqueness of the text, deny spontaneity, originality and self-expression. Most of us have an instinctive or ideological attachment to one or more of these values (…)” (1). In order to subvert those ‘instinctive ideologies’ and establish new connections, Tokarczuk not only plays with different perspectives, but also interweaves the horror story with a range of different structural elements that are typical of other genres. Besides the genre categorization on the cover of the book, the novel includes a ‘dramatis personae’, which is commonly seen in plays. Furthermore, at random intervals within the novel, the reader encounters black-and-white photographs of (in chronological order) a postcard of Görbersdorf (8), a map of Görbersdorf (38), an imposing building (116-117), three stamps of a skiing man with the text ‘Görbersdorf i.Schl. Wintersport Höhen-Luftkurort’ (136), a scan of a newspaper with an advert for the ‘Heilanstatt am Buchberg’ (301-302) and a mountainside (327). Some of the photos are referenced in the text, but most are not mentioned at all. The pictures contribute to a visualization of the area in which the novel is set but can be freely interpreted by the reader. Tokarczuk also positions herself in a similar literary tradition as Thomas Mann by the abundance of intertextual references to the Bible and Greek mythology. She supplements these traditional authoritative texts – which can hardly be called genres anymore – with local folklore.[31] Last but not least, Tokarczuk concludes her novel with

[31] On a mountain hike in October, the men of the Guesthouse enjoy a picknick near what the locals call “witches’ mouths”: holes in the mountain floor that whistle during extreme temperature changes. Walter Frommer, who was raised not far from Görbersdorf, tells the men of the witch hunts in the neighbouring areas during the seventeenth century and the detrimental consequences for the villages. Children were

an author's note which specifies that all remarks made by the characters, especially their many derogatory remarks about women, are paraphrased passages of canonical male philosophers and scientists.[32] This way, Tokarczuk incorporates genres such as the (academic) essay and philosophical tractates in *Empuzjon* as well.

The confusion brought on by shifting between perspectives and genres is exemplified in the result of Wojnicz's efforts to view the painting of Abraham and Isaac according to Thilo's instructions.

> "And once the viewer's attention was well and truly put to sleep, a new sight loomed out of the picture, the old contours arranged themselves into something completely different that had not seemed to be there before, but must have been, since now he could see it"(199).

The power of changing perspectives rattles Wojnicz to his core:

> "Wojnicz cried out in horror and turned to look at Thilo, who was gazing at him with satisfaction. 'What did you see?' he asked. 'something like… I don't really know. A face… a body? Something alive?' (…) 'What was it?' asked Wojnicz, shocked. 'Not *was*. It's still there (…)" (199-200).

At first, it seems that Wojnicz's horror of seeing a non-human presence in a familiarly human environment is completely in line with Rubsam's and Prince's observations about the conventions of horror stories. Following their argumentation leads to the question: what conventions about human socials norms should Wojnicz be educated about?

In his response to Wojnicz's fear, Thilo undermines the educational purpose of fear by consoling Mieczysław:

> "'It's an illusion, don't be afraid.' 'But the picture… Which is the real one?' 'Both are real, this one and the other one that's there inside it when you change your way of looking, when you narrow your eyes" (200).

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left motherless, work was left unfinished. Right after, Lukas and August engage in a discussion whether it was Apuleius or Aristophanes, who first mentioned witches (99-103).

[32] The list includes canonical writers from classical antiquity such as Augustine of Hippo, Ovid and Plato to modern times such as Jack Kerouac and Ezra Pound. The author's note covers great thinkers in a variety of disciplines as well, ranging from philosophy (Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Sartre) to music (Wagner) to the academics (Darwin, Freud).

In this quote, Thilo demonstrates how shifting one's focus from the human to the non-human enables the viewer to uncover other forms of life. However, he underlines that the presence of the latter is not contingent on the perspective of the observer: entities such as landscapes are always present in a shared environment. How and *if* an entity is observed is a matter of choice or willingness on the side of the observer. Yet, as Thilo emphasises, this fact is not something to fear, but simply something to understand.

In conclusion, the integration of multiple genres, alongside visual elements, into the novel prevents easy categorization and therefore challenges the traditional canon formation process. Furthermore, a stable human sphere is subverted by explaining how not only the characters but also readers can train themselves to be more attentive to the omnipresence of non-human entities in their surroundings.

3.3 Narration

Before moving on to the narrative form of *Empuzjon,* as means of an introduction, I want to point out an interesting similarity in genre-classification between *Der Zauberberg* and *Empuzjon*. As of yet, I have left undiscussed the educational function that is characteristic of both the genre of horror as well as the *Bildungsroman,* as which *Der Zauberberg* is often classified. In the extensive *Thomas Mann's The Magic Mountain: A Reader's Guide,* Symington explains: "[t]he basic structure of a *Bildungsroman* shows the hero (it is usually a male, at least until more recent times) progressing by means of various experiences and adventures from being a callow and naïve youth, into becoming a mature and productive member of society" (24).[33] Although this genre is not easily definable, part of its classification presumes a set of standard elements. The genre specifies the form of a 'roman' as one of its inherent qualities, which gained popularity during the eighteenth century. A common feature of the 'novel' is an omniscient narrator in the third person singular, which is the case for *Der Zauberberg.* Many scholars have noted the particularly ironic tone of the novel's narrator, who comments on matters such as the relativity of time, the meaning of health and the state of Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century. This ironic voice serves as a counterpart to Hans' naivety and therefore fits the pedantic nature of the *Bildungsroman* quite well. The specific function of the *Bildungsroman*, namely, is that

[33] For more material related to the genre of the *Bildungsroman,* see Sarah Graham, *A History of the Bildungsroman,* or Martin Swales, *The German Bildungsroman from Wieland to Hesse.*

it “embodied the noble bourgeois ideal of education for life as a productive citizen” (Symington 24). Without intervening directly in the story, the narrator provides the reader with philosophical reflections about the problems that Castorp faces, which was, at the height of the popularity of the *Bildungsroman*, a humanist ideal. But the irony goes further: Mann knows that readers will understand that this coming-of-age story will amount to nothing. At the start of the novel, just two possible outcomes present themselves: either Hans dies on the mountain, or on the battle grounds of World War I. So if *Der Zauberberg* and *Empuzjon* both broadcast an educational message about living up to societal norms – in the midst of a Europe on the verge of armed conflict, isolated on the top of a mountain, the question could be asked: “[w]hat is he educated *for*?” (Symington 24).

Der Zauberberg was written in the aftermath of the First World War (1924) and could therefore rely on this commonly known fact in its (ironic) discussion of Europe’s future. In *Empuzjon* Tokarczuk takes a slightly different approach. Most of the novel is written from the traditional third person perspective and is focused on the main character, the 24-year-old Polish student Mieczysław Wojnicz. However, at times, the novel smoothly transitions back and forth between a feminine first-person plural in simple present and a third-person singular narration in past tense.

Like Castorp*,* Wojnicz’s time is mostly spent listening to the conversations of others. Compared to *Der Zauberberg,* the third person narrator in *Empuzjon* similarly depicts the dialogue and guesses the inner thoughts of the main characters based on Wojnicz’s opinions, but never makes observations on a meta-level. This right is reserved for the truly exceptional we-narrators of *Empuzjon*. The novel opens as follows:

> “The view is obscured by clouds of steam from the locomotive that trail along the platform. To see everything we must look beneath them, let ourselves be momentarily blinded by the grey haze, until the vision that emerges after this trail is sharp, incisive and all-seeing” (*Empuzjon,* 15).

In most languages the specificity of the grammatical form ‘we’ that Tokarczuk uses in Polish cannot be translated, but this first-person plural is explicitly female. The narration situates the readers on the platform of a train station, stationary and possibly waiting for a person to either board or exit the train. The address in the ‘we’-form serves two functions in this passage: the reader is now included in a non-defined group, and

the whole of ‘we’ stands firmly on the ground. This form of narration does not allow the reader to hover above the tracks, guided by an omniscient narrator who is unbothered by weather circumstances. These opening lines reveal the novel’s central message: Perspective – whether from the narrators or characters – represents a specific vantage point that shapes what readers see and how they interpret this information. It shapes the narrative voice, character development, crucial scenes and the overall plot structure. The quoted passage above functions as exposition, as it helps readers to understand that comprehensive vision is impossible. In this case, temporary blindness due to clouds of steam creates the contrast necessary for the subsequent clarity of perception. However, while these first sentences invite the readers to identify with the narrators, in later passages it becomes clear that the narrators are more knowledgeable than the readers.

It seems that the we-narrators embody a non-human presence which has different cognitive abilities – especially when it comes to perception – compared to humans. To give an example: after the mysterious death of Frau Opitz, the proprietor’s wife, the narrators remark about her funeral:

> “By a twist of circumstance, as Frau Opitz’s body was descending on ropes into the open grave, the exact autumn equinox took place, and the ecliptic was aligned in such a special way that it counterbalanced the vibration of the Earth. Naturally, nobody noticed this – people have more important things on their minds. But we know” (82).

The scene unfolds through the eyes of the we-narrators, but the ironic tone prevents readers from feeling included in the narration. First, the narrators seem to admit to their non-human nature as opposed to the other characters as well as the readers of the novel. Their awareness of heavenly constellations (and other natural phenomena) hints at their unity with their surrounding environment. However, this quoted remark can hardly be read as revealing their mysterious identity, which leaves an opening for readers to connect with the narrators. After all, they seem to suggest that ‘people’ *could have* noticed the autumn equinox, had they paid closer attention.

Besides establishing an ambiguous relationship to the readers, Tokarczuk likewise immediately introduces a tension between the two prevalent narrative forms. The we-narrators are observe the events at the Guesthouse at any time they like. Yet, Wojnicz, readers learn, has an irrational fear of being looked at. He even goes as far

as stuffing keyholes and chinks in the wood boards with balls of paper or bread (21). Wojnicz's weariness plays a vital role in this *Bildungsroman*-like novel, which will be discussed in a later chapter. The narration allows for a hint of dramatic irony, in which the readers always know more than the protagonist. The form in which this appears however diverges from the classical third person narrator and presents itself as a mysterious we-form. As if breaking through the traditional narrative, neither the reader nor Mieczysław knows when they will appear.

In the above three sections of this chapter on title, genre and narrative, I have shown that Tokarczuk positions herself within the prevalent frameworks of canon formation, drawing on certain conventions of storytelling. Simultaneously, these structures are subverted by the introduction of mystical and feminine elements, highlighting the presence of these voices that have persisted despite being systematically ignored. It is Tokarczuk's aim to wander off well-trodden paths. This journey is guided by the tender we-narrators of the novel:

> "And now we shall leave them [i.e. the inhabitants of the guesthouse] there, debating around the table covered with an ominously patterned cloth, we shall leave them (…). It has started to rain, droplets are flowing down the roof and forming transparent, shining lace before dripping onto the ground (…) down the path trodden by patient animals. But we shall return" (58).

The contrast between the traditional canon-adhering characters and the still malleable Wojnicz creates the backdrop against which movement is used as a strategy to entangle canonical stories with marginalized presences from the archive. In the next chapter, I will be following the we-narrators down paths "trodden by patient animals". I will analyse Tokarczuk's practice of bringing back feminine presences from the archive into the main story. In line with Hartman, Tokarczuk emphasizes that silences are still forms of presences. Only the tender narrator can pierce the veil between the buzzing world of the Guesthouse for Gentleman – in which the conditions of a symposium are mimicked – and the wandering (feminine) spirits, revealing the inherent plurality to even the most one-sided stories. I will continue this line of reasoning through Bruno Latour's ANT and elaborate on how non-human entities are represented in *Empuzjon.* As I will show, Tokarczuk uses a particular narrative form that engages with non-human entities with tenderness rather than adopting a top-down human perspective. Further analysis of the novel will reveal how Tokarczuk's practice of bringing other voices from the

archive to the surface contributes to an understanding of the canon as a more dynamic, open structure.

IV. THE ARCHIVE

In the previous chapter, I have argued that Tokarczuk entangles structures that strengthen connections to the existing canon such as the title, genre and narration with presences that have been systematically archived. Tokarczuk's choice of narration is particularly notable, since the traditional omniscient narrator is interrupted every so often by mysterious we-narrators. In this chapter, I will examine in more detail which overlooked perspectives are breaking into the main narrative. The goal is to analyse how Tokarczuk represents both female as well as non-human presences to establish a more inclusive practice of canon formation. She does so by focusing on the body. A body, I will show, 'embodies' the tension between structure and stability on the one hand, and movement and change on the other hand. Werner, in his discussion of *Bieguni*, has already pointed out that "the body as a whole is as if designed to move, to introduce change to the world, while simultaneously being a robust, multi-layered structure made of tightly-packed organs" (441). Throughout the novel, it becomes increasingly clear that the returning mentions of Mieczysław's scopophobia are a crucial element to the plot. The crux to his coming-of-age story is overcoming a fear of being different and being perceived, pinned down or categorized by prying eyes. All his life Mieczysław was taught to hide himself from the world. Thilo von Hahn, however, teaches Mieczysław that perception is not unequivocal and can be re-appropriated to perceive bodies differently. In the novel the body and its recognizable shape is a structure Tokarczuk returns to for representation of any kind. In the first section of this chapter, I will discuss feminine presences that are presented in varying forms through the critical lens of Hartman. Taking into account that some figures cross the boundaries between human and nature, in the second part of this chapter, I will additionally turn to Bruno Latour's Actor-Network-Theory and discuss the protagonist Mieczysław and the figures of the Tuntschi. Latour's methodology will illustrate, in the last part of this chapter, how Tokarczuk summons non-human presences from the archive through movement.

4.1 Feminine Presences

On 1 November 2024 Olga Tokarczuk and her Dutch translator Karol Lesman were invited by the University of Amsterdam to be interviewed about the European Literature Prize that they would receive a few days after. During this interview, Tokarczuk expressed her disappointment while re-reading *Der Zauberberg:*

> "In the sixth reading, or perhaps in the fourth, I don't remember, I totally understood that this is a misogynistic book. (…) I started to think, why are there no women in this book? What happened? And why do I, as a reader, treat it as obvious that there are no women, only men discussing the world? Sure, there is one woman, who is a dead body at the beginning, and there is another woman who's knocking the door very noisily. Then there's also a handicapped waitress. All those female characters are broken."

Similarly to Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg,* the number of female characters in *Empuzjon* is sparse and many either do not speak, are never seen or are in fact deceased. On the day of Wojnicz's arrival at the Guesthouse for Gentleman, the proprietor's wife Frau Klara Opitz unexpectedly passes away. Her death is ruled a suicide. Wojnicz, shaken by this tragic event, reflects on the circumstances of her untimely departure and the logistics of her funeral:

> "The funeral was on a Tuesday, which Wojnicz did not regard as a good sign. At home in Lwów it was said to be a bad thing for a body to wait through a Sunday to be buried, and that if it did, the deceased would drag someone after them into the grave. But this corpse had waited through two Sundays" (74).

In the subverted universe Tokarczuk has created, this quotation encapsulates the author's central message about movement and change. Wojnicz's story at first glance depicts stability – he is removed from the events at the foot of the mountain, waiting to be cured of an incurable disease, supposedly learning immutable theories about life. However, Tokarczuk suggests a deeper truth. Stability can never really exist as change is always imminent. Even death is not a definitive state and can transgress the boundaries to the living. In the following section, I will explore how Tokarczuk further problematizes the notion of stability, or in this case the canon, as an unpliable structure by including historically neglected perspectives from the archive. Hartman's definition of the fabulated 'Venus'-figure as a "haint" will support my analysis of the varying feminine presences in *Empuzjon* as haunting figures (5). I will show that Hartman's questioning of the objectivity and hierarchical nature of historiography sheds light on Tokarczuk's criticism of the current process of canon formation.

Hartman and the feminine archive

Polish literary scholar Michal Choiński already connected Hartman's approach of critical fabulation to Tokarczuk's experimental novel *Bieguni* in 2021. His topic of research is the significance of movement in Tokarczuk's and Hartman's work, providing a useful definition of the concept to examine the activity of the haunting female figures in *Empuzjon* with as well. Choiński notes how Hartman and Tokarczuk share remarkable similarities in their literary approaches to historical trauma, particularly regarding silences and the violent suppression or erasure of bodies and voices from archives. Both writers foreground the necessity of empathy (or tenderness, in Tokarczuk's case) to confront fragmented archives that otherwise allow for one-sided legitimizations of history. In 'Venus in Two Acts' Hartman explicitly states her aim: "I have attempted to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done" (11). In her fabricated narrative, Hartman showcases how the dominant discourse on the transatlantic slave trade is incommensurable with the experiences of the affected, which raises questions about the objectivity of historiography based on archival stories. Instead, Hartman states she has "produced a counter-history at the intersection of the fictive and the historical" (12).

An important nuance to take into consideration is that Hartman wields a slightly different definition of the archive than I do in this thesis. Her research is based on physical historical documents, that have stored a discriminatory narrative of a complex historical event. The silences should therefore be understood as physical gaps in a collection of documents. According to Assmann's definition, the archive is a much broader concept. The archive is not limited to tangible objects such as documents but includes any form of cultural expression. Furthermore, for Assmann the chronology of the archive plays a less important role than for Hartman. At any time, information from the archive can be recontextualized to fit the current state of the canon. This is why Assmann defines the archive as a *Zwischenspeicher,* or intermediary storage (103). This difference is significant, because it explains Hartman's aim to supply the archive with non-existent narratives in contrast to Tokarczuk's aim to focus attention on pre-existing perspectives and voices. Hartman, in line with Gilbert and Gubar's theory on parallel female canons, attempts to create "a counter-history" and dismantles the authority of the dominant canon by giving silent actors a voice to speak back. Tokarczuk, on the contrary, is willing to work with established structures and reconnect

these with overlooked perspectives. Nevertheless, both Hartman and Tokarczuk identify a similar mechanism within the archive, which has worrying consequences for the process of canon formation. An acceptance of the silences in the archive will legitimize violence against women in the present.

Since *Empuzjon's* main plot revolves around Wojnicz and his retreat in Görbersdorf, most of the novel consists of conversations. Plot-driving events are limited to Wojnicz's arrival, Frau Opitz's death and burial, occasional walks through the forest, and the revealing closing scene. These in-depth conversations occur only among the male inhabitants of the Guesthouse for Gentleman, while Wojnicz maintains merely superficial contact with the sparse female characters. Early in the novel, Tokarczuk characterizes the absence of women in Wojnicz's life:

> "In Mieczysław Wojnicz's family world, the women had vague, short, dangerous lives, and then they died, remaining in people's memories as fleeting shapes without contour. They were reduced to a remote, unclear impulse placed in the universe only temporarily, for the sole purpose of its biological consequences" (44).

This description of Wojnicz's scarce interaction with and understanding of women echoes Hartman's evaluation of the archive she engages with:

> "The archive is, in this case, a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhea, a few lines about a whore's life, an asterisk in the grand narrative of history" (Hartman 2).

The quotation underlines the selectiveness of the archive according to Hartman, in which women are primarily remembered through their violent deaths and/or reduced to their biological functions. Archival silences should be critically reflected upon, because they are often misused in the present. For example, Hartman identifies a slippery slope when it comes to silences in the historiography of the transatlantic slave trade. She remarks: "[t]he dangers entailed in this endeavor (i.e. archival work) cannot be bracketed or avoided because of the inevitability of the reproduction of such scenes of violence, which define the state of blackness and the life of the ex-slave" (7). This consequence of archival silencing is thematized in *Empuzjon* as well. Ironically, the male characters who ignore the presences of women continuously define what a woman is or *should* be. On one of their many walks for example, the men discuss the

raison d'être of women in society. Herr August ponders: "'It won't let me stop thinking about the fact that a woman has indeed been equipped by nature with the great power of giving birth, but is entirely devoid of control over that power.' (…)." To which Herr Lukas replies: "'[b]ecause a woman's body belongs not only to her, but to mankind' (…). 'Since she gives birth, she's public property, this capacity of hers to give birth cannot be treated as her *personal* quality (…). At the same time as being herself, a woman belongs to all of us'" (146). The characters in *Empuzjon* draw conclusions based on the canonical knowledge available to them about women instead of their (scarce) interactions with real women. Similarly, these works have concerned themselves with defining, diagnosing, scrutinizing women, but are primarily based on assumptions and biases. In an interview with Margot Dijkgraaf, Tokarczuk states: "*The Books of Jacob* is a very good case. When I did research, I spent a lot of time in libraries. I looked into the documents, and I saw women there. Sometimes, they were just mentioned by name, or mentioned as a wife of somebody, or a daughter of a man, and so on. But they were present. Of course, less present than men. But then, if you think, what does it mean that a woman has a bunch of keys at her belt? It means that she was very powerful, because she could open every single storage, and so on." Such details are overlooked by the male characters in *Empuzjon,* but by the canonical authors they rely on as well. Keeping the author's note at the end of the novel in mind, which explains that all misogynistic comments are actually paraphrased from a considerable cross-section of Western philosophy, Herr August and Herr Lukas showcase how uncritical circulation of canonized knowledge can keep an exclusionary canon intact.

To better understand how both Hartman and Tokarczuk challenge this discriminatory mechanism in the canon formation process, it is important to acknowledge the different approach to fictionalization within the respective genres in which they write. In academia, the fabrication of information is justifiably a controversial practice, whereas it is the core business of novel writing. Yet, for both Hartman and Tokarczuk the fluidity between fact and fiction can be seen as the core of their academic and artistic practices. Resisting excessive attachment to the literal or the factual, and communicating both lived or imagined experiences leads to insights about shared emotions, undiscovered perspectives or surprising correlations – in other

words, it makes the Other less other.[34] This is why Choiński accentuates that 'Venus in Two Acts' and *Bieguni* are both stories about travel and movement, which he discerns as the most vital point of comparison between the two works. He notes: "[m]ovement thus becomes a vehicle of understanding, and journeys take on a metaphysical meaning" (55). In *Bieguni,* Tokarczuk uses travel – physical movement – to complicate rigid structures and reconceptualize stories of violence and marginalization. In *Empuzjon,* she takes a completely different approach. Here, movement is an act exclusively reserved for figures that are typically relegated to the archive. Against a stationary, masculine backdrop, even the slightest movement from the archive to the main story becomes visible.[35] In the following section, I will examine in more detail in what way Tokarczuk represents female characters and how their ability to move incites a more inclusive practice of canon formation.

The Women of Görbersdorf

A noticeable feature of Tokarczuk's novel is the stark gender imbalance: the predominance of male characters stands in ironic contrast to the sparse and largely archetypal female figures. This imbalance is not incidental but rather a deliberate narrative strategy that evokes Hartman's approach of 'summoning' or 'conjuring' feminine presences from the depths of the archive. When examined through this lens, the female characters in *Empuzjon* can be understood as existing on a spectrum between visibility and tangibility – some appearing as embodied presences, other as mere whispers, absences or even corpses that nonetheless shape the narrative. In an interview with her English translator Antonia Lloyd-Jones, Tokarczuk emphasises the role of irony in her recontextualization of these presences from the archive: "I have taken the liberty of taking this horror story of the patriarchate to its furthest extreme, until its arguments cross the boundary into absurdity; instead of being frightening, they

[34] The 'Other' or more accurately the act of 'othering' is defined here as the exertion of power through narrative to define and subjugated marginalized groups. The term 'other' was popularized by the work *Orientalism* by Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said, in which he discusses the representation of the Orient as 'the Other' in Western narratives.

[35] The epigraph of the novel is taken from Fernando Pessao's *The Book of Disquiet,* which already motivates the readers to question the extent of common knowledge. It says: "Every day things happen in the world that can't be explained by any law of things we know. Every day they're mentioned and forgotten, and the same mystery that brought them takes them away, transforming their secret into oblivion. Such is the law by which things that can't be explained must be forgotten. The visible world goes on as usual in the broad daylight. Otherness watches us from the shadows" (9).

reveal themselves to be preposterous and laughable." When the archived experiences of the agile female figures unexpectedly intersect with the stationary and stagnating world of the men, the latter's surprise about the mere presence of women emphasize their foolish stance. I will argue however, that the physical presences or conspicuous absences of female characters contribute to the novel's exploration of movement. The emphasis on the (visible or invisible) body when describing female characters underlines Tokarczuk's conviction that an awareness of the body and its limits is necessary for encountering other perspectives and sharing experiences.

In the village of Görbersdorf Wojnicz notices the presence of a few female inhabitants, even though he never speaks to them. On occasion he runs into two elderly women, Frau Weber and Frau Brecht – both conspicuous names. While joining August for a walk, Wojnicz's eye is caught by the women and he notes that "one had very swollen legs, (…) while the other one was so ugly as to be fascinating. Her drooping lower lip made her look like an ancient sculpture depicting some sort of creature from Hades" (70). Aware of his staring, August adds: "[a]pparently there is a third, but she never comes outside, and no one has actually seen her for years" (70).[36] These figures seem to be part of the scenery of Görbersdorf, as Mieczysław notices them almost every time he steps outside the Guesthouse. Paradoxically, because he never approaches the two women, their presence contributes greatly to the mythical (and possibly threatening) atmosphere of the village. A comparable dismissive attitude is displayed by Wojnicz and the other men towards Sydonia Patek, the female nurse at the sanatorium. Despite receiving daily tuberculosis treatments – which presumably take place under her care and would therefore mean being in frequent contact with her, the men rarely acknowledge (and much less appreciate) her medical expertise. Instead, the focus during Wojnicz's and Sydonia's first encounter is on her physical appearance: "Wojnicz was received by a nurse with red swellings beneath her eyes. A polite smile briefly shielded her large, yellow teeth (…)" (29). Without any meaningful context about her professional capabilities, the men casually brand her a witch and speculate mockingly about her sexuality. Wojnicz attempts to explain the shared fear of Patek and concludes that it is because of "[h]er white uniform (…) with a belt that had a bunch of keys attached to it"(235). Essentially, Wojnicz describes the root of their

[36] These figures are highly reminiscent of a famous literary trope in regards to witches: dangerous mythical sisters that always appear in threes, such as the wicked witches in Shakespeare's 'Macbeth', the Norse faith-deities or the infamous Greek Gorgon Sisters Stheno, Euryale and Medusa.

collective unease: she fails to conform to their expectations of what a nurse should embody – namely, someone who is both charming and accommodating. Instead, the small detail of her keyring reveals to the reader that Patek is a woman with the ability to freely roam the Sanatorium's chambers and has the power to decide which doors open and which close.

A last female figure that Wojnicz has little to no interaction with is a direct subversion of a particular female character from *Der Zauberberg*. At the Orthodox church where Frau Opitz's funeral is held, Wojnicz's eye is caught by a woman in a large hat. He is immediately struck by her appearance but cannot quite place his sudden interest in her. This figure parallels Hans Castorp's relationship with Madame Clawdia Chauchat, the Russian woman who captivates him in the novel. Castorp's attraction appears paradoxically rooted in what he perceives as her improprieties – his greatest annoyance is her slamming the doors of the dining hall. Yet his fascination persists because she evokes memories of his latent sexual interest tied to a former male classmate. Madame Chauchat is interpreted by many scholars as a figure representing the sexualized foreign Other.[37] Her telling name, a description of her as a "Kätzchen [das] zur Milchschüssel schleicht" (125) and her refusal to wear her wedding ring are often mentioned as arguments to characterize her as promiscuous. In the novel, Frau Engelhart, a regular dinnerguest, speculates about Madame Chauchat's choice, saying: "[o]der sie findet es spießbürgerlich, einen Ehering zu tragen (…) Außerdem hat so ein Ring etwas geradezu Abweisendes und Ernüchterndes, er ist doch ein Symbol der Hörigkeit" (126). Moreover, this quality is immediately linked to Madame Chauchat's heritage. "Ich kenne das, die russischen Frauen haben alle so etwas Freies und Großzügiges in ihrem Wesen" (126). Castorp places her through a fixation on her physical features, particularly when he calls her "kirgisenäugig" (131). Even his mentor Settembrini continuously warns him of her Slavic nature, which could corrupt young Castorp's mind. In *Empuzjon*, similar comments about the unnamed woman's way of walking and her Russian descent are made, raising the expectations that she could potentially be Wojnicz's love interest.[38]

[37] Irina Kuznetsova for example calls her "the barbarian Russian temptress" (277). In 'Penetrating Desire', Esther K. Bauer elaborately interprets Madame Chauchat as representing "Asia and the East, and thus unconventionality, immorality, irrationality, eros, sickness, and death, i.e., the exact opposite of Castorp's sphere" (491).

[38] Herr Opitz for example remarks: "Watch out, Herr Wojnicz. That minx has probably set her cap at you already. And don't be fooled by the fact that she's a Slav either. They're still pagans"(233).

However, the explanation of Wojnicz's fascination differs significantly from Castorp's feelings towards Madame Chauchat. In *Empuzjon* "the sight of her caused him immense, indescribable pleasure" because she reminds him of "the furniture, rugs and curtains, the chairs upholstered in soft leather and the great care with which all these objects had been arranged in the right places (…)" (138). More complex than simple feelings of attraction, Wojnicz is fascinated by the unnamed woman in the hat because of "the integrity, the significance and harmony that until now had peeped out at him from various objects, but never as a whole, only ever in pieces" (138). The exact reason behind Wojnicz's reaction will be explained in the following, but with this surprising reveal, the lady in the hat does not return to the main narrative and does not fulfill the literary trope of love interest.

The representation of these archetypal figures – the witches, the nurse, the love interest – are enveloped in an ironic tone. On the surface, each woman appears to fulfill conventional roles within the house or at least, in relation to the male characters. However, any minor deviation from this expected role becomes subject to the scrutiny and overwrought analysis of the men at the guesthouse. The men obsess over these small departures based on their predetermined notions of femininity, attempting to rationalize and explain away any behavior. At the core of these discussions stand the female body, or how women present themselves to the men. Simply existing can be a threat to their understanding of how women should appear or act, but simultaneously being absent also raises eyebrows. The elderly women in the village are accused of being witches – because they roam around the village -, but mostly, because they might have a sister, who does not come outside the house.[39] Or, in the case of Frau Opitz, death can be an annoying disturbance to the men's expectations of female behavior. Her demise is felt most heavily in the preparation and quality of their dinner. Similarly to Mann's novel, the act of eating, the preparation of intricate menus, the traditions adhering to certain foods are thematized at regular intervals in the novel.[40] Especially to Wojnicz food plays a large role in his life, in so far that it seems to be the only topic

[39] In response to August claiming that all local women are witches, Lukas replies: "[d]efinitely those two toads who sit outside their house, what are their names, Frau Brecht and Frau… I've forgotten (…)" (234).

[40] A substantial passage in the novel explains the delicate relationship between young Wojnicz and his uncle Emil (133-137). The visits of his father's youngest brother, who serves as a cavalry officer in the Austrian army, are accompanied by a typical Silesian dish, called czernina, or duck's blood soup. His father's attempts to provide Wojnicz with a model of masculinity, his own uncle, were always thwarted by memory of this particular dish.

of conversation he shares with his father. Yet, the question of who *makes* the food is left unanswered by Mann. Tokarczuk therefore sources the ironic tone from an apparent obviousness of the societal position of women, and the chaos that ensues when women would disappear. In *Empuzjon,* for example, with the questionable suicide of Frau Opitz, the daily life of the inhabitants quite literally comes to a standstill. Their ignorance of their dependency on such commonplace activities, relegated to women, becomes almost absurd.

Klara Opitz

Unlike the other female figures, Klara Opitz, the fourth and last wife of proprietor Wilhelm Opitz, will eventually influence Wojnicz's life in a fundamental way. As *Empuzjon* can be interpreted as a coming-of-age story, Wojnicz's early impressions of her shift dramatically over the course of the novel, culminating in a quite literal unification of the two characters, as I will explain in more detail below. In his confusion about the strange, new place he finds himself in, Mieczysław first encounters Frau Opitz briefly before her fatal demise.

> "There was a soft knock at the door, and before he had time to say 'Come in', a leather boot had wedged its way into the gap between the frame and the door, gently opening it; next the black pleats of a skirt appeared, the lacy edge of an apron and a breakfast tray, which was soon standing on the little table. The boots, lace and apron vanished as quickly as they had appeared, and the bewildered Wojnicz merely managed to pull his rug over himself, stammer a greeting and say thank you" (23).

Mere moments later, Wojnicz stumbles upon her dead body sprawled out on the dinner table. The narrator remarks: "Wojnicz had never seen any woman so close and so still before; they always flitted past, in constant motion" (40). A fascination with Frau Opitz ensues. Her body may not physically be present anymore – according to Wojnicz, it overstayed its time above ground – yet her spirit weaves as a red thread throughout the novel. Every male character voices their opinion on the circumstances surrounding her death, ranging from statements about the fragile minds of women to accusatory distrust of Herr Opitz.[41] Especially Thilo Von Hahn expresses his concern: "he beat that

[41] Herr August for example explains Frau Opitz's decision through a biological difference between male and female brains: "[w]here the will is located in men, in women we have desire". His explanation is underwritten by Herr Lukas, who adds: "it's true, the female brain is quite simply smaller, and there's no

wife of his, he treated her like dirt. I think he killed her, then hanged her" (63). Later, whilst Wojnicz discusses the deteriorating state of Thilo with Herr August and Herr Opitz, the latter counters this accusation. Opitz, he explains, is driven by his need to "fulfil [his] obligations and not be carried away by emotion" (118). His wife obviously could not handle such pressure, adding: "A man must be above all these feelings, above mawkish desperation and tears. Women revel in such things" (118). He then confesses to having been unhappily married at least four times. This raises a question formulated by Hartman. If the only certainty about character traits can be found in "[i]nfelicitous speech, obscene utterances, and perilous commands" (6), "how might it be possible to generate a different set of descriptions from this archive? To imagine what could have been?" (7) In *Empuzjon,* Tokarczuk proposes a possible answer.

Continuously drawn to Klara Opitz's undefined life, Wojnicz spooks around her quarters and finds refuge in her possessions. During his stay at the guesthouse, Wojnicz increasingly comes to terms with himself. As it turns out, besides suffering from tuberculosis, Wojnicz has a bodily deviation (which he calls an 'anomaly'), that he desperately tries to hide. When towards the end of the novel Dr. Semperweiss encourages him to feel comfortable in his ambiguous body, Wojnicz feels elated. This will be discussed in more detail in the next section. Wojnicz has little time to overthink this new perspective on life, because his contemporary Thilo Von Hahn passes away at the end of September. Only a few weeks later, on a November night, Wojnicz follows Raimund deep into the forest, oblivious to the impending danger. He was chosen by Opitz and the coal burners to be brought to face an unknown force of nature, demanding its annual sacrifice. Yet, for undisclosed reasons Wojnicz is not accepted as a suitable victim and escapes the scene. Half-naked, belittled by the prying eyes of the coal burners and mortified by his encounter with the we-narrators, Wojnicz returns to the safety of the attic:

> "Finding himself in Frau Opitz's room, he boldly opened the wardrobe and saw several pieces of clothing hanging on pegs. Slowly he undressed (…) Now he stood naked opposite the open wardrobe. A small, cracked mirror above the washbasin reflected his body divided into pieces, as if this image were part of a

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denying it when objective research has proved it." Lastly, Herr Frommer elaborates on the appearance of women as rational beings, stating: "à propos, sometimes when we address a women, we might gain the impression that she replies sensibly and thinks as we do. But that is an illusion They imitate our way of communicating" (53).

> larger jigsaw puzzle that each of us has been given a lifetime to assemble" (322).

After this revelation – he stares at himself shamelessly for the first time – Wojnicz dresses in Klara Opitz's clothing and continues his life under her name. How their lives continue exactly is left unclear, which is reminiscent of Hartman's cautiousness when fabulating stories as well.[42] Wojnicz is simultaneously both Mieczysław and Klara, and also neither of the two. Better yet, their experiences have intersected to create a complex network of stories, that has brought these particular characters and their experiences with other characters closer together. Wojnicz himself formulates this as: "[h]e felt plural, multiple, multifaceted, compound and complicated like a coral reef, like a mushroom spawn whose actual existence is located underground" (322-323).[43] Wojnicz has not only made himself more familiar with the Other by investigating Klara beyond her archetypal role, but has found the similarities that bind them. Her clothing and her identity feel like an apt addition to his own personality, which simultaneously explains Wojnicz's interest in the lady in the hat. His involvement with her was not of the romantic kind, but rather originated from an envy about her put-togetherness.[44]

Gliceria and Wojnicz's unnamed mother

In a clear echo of Sigmund Freud, Dr. Semperweiss – Wojnicz's residing physician – interprets Wojnicz's relation to the absent women in his family, and the impact this has had on Wojnicz's adult life. He says:

> "If you were to dream of water, or frogs, wet things, and oh, caves for example, it could mean that you have a complex to do with your mother…' (…) 'Then you would have to fortify your virility, stand up to this softening energy. That's what

[42] Hartman is adamant about recreating lives as accurately as possibly, which means to be cautious of writing redemptive stories. Her academic background still requires her to remain critical of the narratives she is presenting, in which (sadly) a violent death is sadly more likely than salvation from the horrible circumstances.

[43] Interestingly enough, the fields of queer studies and mycology have collaborated more often over the last few decades. An interesting take is proposed by Maja-Lisa Müller in her article 'Blobs, Slime, and Fungi. The Queer Potential of a Mediamycology'. She connects the historical attitude towards e.g. fungi to a broader understanding of gender as a spectrum rather than a binary.

[44] The figure of Pribislav Hippe is also mirrored in *Empuzjon* as a fellow classmate with the name Anatol, or Tolek for short. As an echo to a well-known passage in *Der Zauberberg,* Mieczysław similarly "let Tolek rummage in his wooden pencil case" (106). Yet in *Empuzjon,* Tolek is equated to Thilo rather than the lady in the hat.

> you need, Wojnicz! You must kill in yourself your mother who abandoned you – '" (171).

His mother's absence has haunted Wojnicz throughout his upbringing and has complicated his relationship with his father. On multiple occasions, Wojnicz describes the awkwardness with which his father accomplished simple tasks in his upbringing. This discomfort mostly hinged on his growing body, which January Wojnicz instructs Wojnicz Jr. to always cover to avoid peeking eyes from others. When Wojnicz discovers Frau Opitz's corpse in the Guesthouse, he is immediately reminded of his nurse Gliceria (for a lack of memories about his mother). She has been the sole female presence throughout his youth and he remembers her with fondness:

> "(…) he used to see her hands, and the wrinkled skin on them. He would grip that skin between his thumb and forefinger, (…) and in doing so he would smooth out her hands until they became almost young. He used to fantasize that if could work out how to smooth all of Gliceria (…), to tighten up her outer form, maybe he would succeed in saving his nanny from old age" (42-43).

To the young Wojnicz the precarity of Gliceria is already apparent: she will not be around for long. He continues to describe her as existing "in his memory as a blurred figure, always veiled by something, out of focus, on the run, a long thin streak" (42). His absent mother and Gliceria are described as spectre-like figures, who despite their uneasy association with death bring Wojnicz comfort in his own skin. When Gliceria bathes him as a young boy, he remembers: "[t]he parts of his bodies were his 'handies', his 'tootsies', his 'leglets', his 'wee chest'; addressed this way, he felt pleased with himself and somehow even proud of his existence, a feeling he never had when communing with his father" (189).

A similar awkwardness that Wojnicz connects with his father is brought on by Dr. Semperweiss and his intruding medicinal techniques.[45] Wojnicz responds to the curious advice of Dr. Semperweiss to murder his dead mother:

> 'She died, I don't have to kill her,' Wojnicz corrected him. 'Even so, she abandoned you, and that is taking strength away from you. To make up for her

[45] Under the guise of religious reasons, Wojnicz refuses to undress for Dr. Semperweiss (168-169).

absence, you identify with her in a dangerous way, hence this ladylike effeminacy, this softness'" (171).

Although Dr. Semperweiss is aware of the power that Wojnicz's mother still holds over him, even in her absence, he encourages his young patient to bury her even deeper into oblivion. Paradoxically, the doctor states that the mother is to blame, since she "infect[s] the child with excessive emotionality, which eventually leads to all sorts of illnesses and feebleness of spirit, and above all inner effeminacy" (170). Yet, the absence of Wojnicz's mother yields the same results.

Tokarczuk presents an ironic take on a similar paradox described by Hartman. Just like Wojnicz is troubled by the absence of his mother, Hartman acknowledges the consequences of missing perspectives and of recounted violence in the archive. A very personal longing for more information and clarity on the lived experiences of black enslaved women was in fact the motivation for her journey to Ghana in the first place. Yet, she is also critical of scholars who have already drawn attention to these missing perspectives before. Restricting oneself to the factual information provided by archival documentation, i.e. only mentioning their (often violent) deaths, rapes or commodification, causes an interpretation of these women as "a divergence or an aberration from the expected and usual course of invisibility" (2), Hartman argues. Violent interaction between canonical figures (such as slave-owners) and these women provides an opportunity for women to break out of the archive, but only for a limited time and within a limited narrative and interpretative framework. This is reminiscent of Dr. Semperweiss who presents a similar argumentation in the novel: the expected course for the upbringing of a young man is along the lines of traditional masculine values, and women, regardless of their presence, are a threat to that. Any form of femininity is considered an interruption to the expected course of life.

Dr. Semperweiss' mention of Wojnicz's mother and the accusatory remarks he makes about her leave Wojnicz confused. This confusion can be explained by the following elaboration Hartman provides. She points out a considerable weakness of simply repeating the information provided by the archives, even if that happens with more sympathy compared to the initial documentation. Such meagre mentions provide "no picture of the everyday life, no pathway to her thoughts, no glimpse of the vulnerability of her face or of what looking at such a face might demand" (2). This is why she criticizes the harsh borders drawn between fact and imagination, and

conceptualized a method of fabulation that attributes more personality, lived experiences and reflections to these silent presences in the archive. In making this nonsensical argument, Tokarczuk showcases how self-evident the existence and therefore the influence of women in everyone's lives is. Seeing violence or femininity as a disturbance to the traditional narrative demonstrates a naïve understanding of reality, which would explain Wojnicz's confusion.

To subvert the idea of femininity as an interruption of the standard, and to refuse a mere portrayal of female characters in very specific archetypal roles (such as mothers, nurses etc.), Tokarczuk seeks out points, where experiences could possibly intersect. Which undeniable similarity between men and women can be found to problematize the divergence in representation? How can we ensure that our understanding of men and women is balanced so that even the briefest mention of a woman in a historical document sparks the same imaginative engagement we give to men? To Tokarczuk, the question to this answer, can be found within the body. Wojnicz's reaction to Dr. Semperweiss' confusing advice illustrates Tokarczuk's main point about movement and structure. Namely, in response to his doctor Wojnicz "shrank inside of himself" (171). This aversive reaction to a violent rejection of his mother is rooted deep inside Wojnicz. Throughout the novel it becomes increasing clear that Wojnicz's body itself cannot be straightforwardly read as a 'male' (or for that matter, 'female') body. By acknowledging the grey area between traditional categories of men and women, or the ambiguous in-between, Tokarczuk creates space for discovering new forms of connection that transcend binary thinking. This allows for relationships and shared experiences that might otherwise remain invisible or impossible within rigid frameworks.

4.2 The In-between

In the analysis of the novel, it remains a challenge to categorize figures, themes or plots as stand-alone, clear-cut concepts. A good example is Mieczysław himself. In this section, I will discuss how Mieczysław 's body exists between traditional gender categories, and how that influences the representation of women in the novel as well. In the subsequent section, my analysis will then also address the identity and representation of the we-narrators. The novel does not provide a conclusive answer to the question of their identities: at best, they can be categorized as possibly mythological, non-human, organically "constructed", women-like entities, which

possibly represent the Tuntschi or the Empusa.[46] Since the novel is so polyvocal, I will draw on two theoretical frameworks to address these different perspectives. Hartman's critical fabulation and focus on feminine perspectives will still be of relevance, but I will supplement her insights by drawing on Bruno Latour's theoretical approach to examine the representation of the non-human. It will become clear that in *Empuzjon,* there are more perspectives than just human ones that can be heard.

Mieczysław Wojnicz

The effeminacy Dr. Semperweiss criticizes has been inside Wojnicz's body the whole time. After being ridiculed for his refusal to undress, Wojnicz reminisces with great unease how "he had constantly been examined, his body constantly an object of wonder, the sight of it constantly prompting an expression of concern on the faces of its observers, most of whom were old gentleman (…)" (256). Although Wojnicz thinks "of himself as normal", his father presents a different point of view. Wojnicz remembers: "[h]is father called these visits consultations. He constantly believed that a curse existed somewhere" (257). As Wojnicz grows up, he notices how the examinations acquire a different nature as well, "becoming more and more fraught, if not fierce, as if his affliction prompted impatience, or even – medically justified, of course – violence" (257). Wojnicz's feminine features are interpretated as 'anomalies', 'deficiencies' or even 'an illness', especially in comparison to the standard of a 'healthy' and, more importantly, 'male' body.

Despite his aversion to being examined, his disturbance about Thilo's death and fear for his own future as a fellow tuberculosis sufferer, Wojnicz decides to see Dr. Semperweiss again towards the end of the novel. This time, however, he undresses completely for the first time. Conquering his fears of "looking, judging, comparing with what ought to be, what must be, what there is elsewhere, not here, but there, among 'everyone'" (292), Wojnicz still fears "the edges of medical equipment", that are "pressing into his harmonious, beautiful body", "(…) even Doctor Semperweiss's pen, which was about to write down the diagnosis and reduce Wojnicz to an anomaly" (292). To Wojnicz's surprise, Dr. Semperweiss remains almost indifferent to Wojnicz's secret

[46] The reviewers of *Empuzjon* are also not in agreement. Some like Jess Cotton for *The Nation* and Ilma Rakusa for the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* point towards the Empusae, while others like Emma Cohen for *The Brooklyn Rail* and Robert Rubsam for *Vulture* accuse the Tuntschi.

and is not keen on reshaping his body to fit into a standard form. Instead, the doctor remarks:

> "[p]eople have their fictions and believe what they have mutually agreed upon. But you know, it's not necessarily true that things are only like this or that. It's simply helpful in navigation, in practice, to say consumption or syphilis, one or the other, but you know best that most of our experiences does not yield to such simple divisions" (293).

Wojnicz and Dr. Semperweiss continue to discuss the benefits and pitfalls of establishing acute opposites. The doctor states: "[s]een like that, the world is far simpler, it's easy to navigate between these poles, it's easy to establish rules of conduct", but, he nuances, "and it's particularly easy to judge others, often reserving the luxury of obscurity for oneself" (294). At one point, Dr. Semperweiss even gets confused about Wojnicz, addressing him as "[y]ou see, Herr, Fräulein… You see…" (294). Wojnicz then rightfully asks "'But what is the world like?'", confused about what to believe. Dr. Semperweiss answers: "Blurred, out of focus, flickering, now like this, now like that, depending on one's point of view" (294).

Interestingly, Dr. Semperweiss provides a bridge between reality as a seemingly fixed structure and the body that is forced to adhere to similar convictions. He concurs that structures can provide safety, but stresses that one should always remember that reality – or the human body – is more complex than simple binary oppositions. Defining Wojnicz's body as male, female (or intersex) would therefore defeat the point Dr. Semperweiss is trying to make. Forcing Wojnicz in the standard of traditional manhood and denying any feminine presence would be a denial of the irrefutable existence of female influence. Instead, the body itself, its features, the point of view of the observer, all contribute to how the body can be viewed and interpreted at a certain moment in time. Wojnicz can simply rely on the absolute, undeniable fact that he *has* a body and that it can be understood in multiple ways.

Wojnicz's revelation about his body conveys an important message about feminine presences in the archive as well. An open perspective, in which the profoundness of a women's life (similar to a men's life) is understood, can contribute to approaching the feminine presences in the archive differently. Instead of simply ignoring them or viewing their (violent) mentions as an interruption of the main narrative, a tender engagement with these presences can unlock surprising

similarities. Perception and its relation to the body is also an important theme when discussing a presence, that holds the space between femininity and non-humanness: the Tuntschi.

The Tuntschi

In this section, I will shift the focus from female perspectives from the archive to the non-human. Since I want to be sensitive to both perspectives in the novel, I will first discuss the Tuntschi (which are often thought to be synonymous with the we-narrators) as a feminine presence. Afterwards, I will discuss the we-narrators, which also represent a non-human perspective. As demonstrated in the previous part, understanding the body as an ambiguous structure is vital to Wojnicz's development. In the following it will become clear that the body enables perception to begin with. To take it a step further: Tokarczuk demonstrates how co-dependent perception is on both human as well as non-human entities. Without other entities, humans would not be able to give meaning to what they perceive.

In their own ways all female characters in *Empuzjon* are ungraspable. Klara Opitz, Gliceria, Wojnicz's mother: all are presented to Mieczysław as unpredictable, unreliable, even dangerous characters. Or in January Wojnicz's words: "women are by nature treacherous and fickle. Weepy. It was impossible to know what to grab hold of, what to trust in them. They were elusive, as slippery as snakes or silk (a peculiar juxtaposition, indeed)" (76). Mieczysław's knowledge of women derives from countless explanations – ranging from biological, theological to sociological and simply anecdotical – by the male figures in his life who attempt to comprehend female behaviour. Unlike the other men, however, Wojnicz remains aloof in these conversations. The difference between the other patients and Wojnicz is most apparent when they encounter the Tuntschi. In particularly rough terrains such as the Alps, the novel explains, local workers will build doll-like effigies from any available materials. Needing to find immediate release for their desires in women-deprived areas, these men copulate with the Tuntschi. Herr Opitz and his assistant Raimund immediately engage in foolery when stumbling upon a Tuntschi, but Wojnicz "felt the alarm of seeing a fellow creature in danger" (177). Back at the guesthouse, the other men mock Wojnicz for his resentment of the local practice: "the fact that Wojnicz had never heard of them meant merely that he was still wet behind the ears and should finally become a man" (179). However, Wojnicz's empathy for the doll and his observant nature has

not gone unnoticed by the we-narrators. Later, Wojnicz encounters a Tuntschi while alone, revealing his true concerns for the doll:

> "Wojnicz stepped back cautiously, staring underfoot in fear of treading on something *live*. With a mixture of horror and fascination he gazed at the effigy, carefully made of whatever was to hand in the forest- stones and moss, twigs, bark, mushroom, leaves and loam. (…) He knew it was the work of those charcoal burners with the sooty faces" (193-194).

Wojnicz immediately perceives the Tuntschi as fundamentally alive, because of the natural form of their body, causing immediate moral distress about her intended purpose.

> "Involuntarily Wojnicz imagined them copulating with the Puppe, in his mind's eye he could see the violence of male desire, its impatience and overpowering force. (…) Then it was as if the shape on the forest floor were groaning and moving its hips, as though an underground force were pushing it upwards" (194).

Though this moment presents an opportunity to demonstrate conventional masculinity for Wojnicz, he refuses to take advantage of the Tuntschi. His compassion for the discarded doll on the forest floor awakens something in the landscape itself – the terrain begins to unveil her history, revealing the invisible violence that transpires on the ground. In his encounters with the Tuntschi and eventually with the we-narrators, Wojnicz presents a different view: he doesn't simply see a female body. Besides his (in contrast to the other inhabitants) empathic reaction, he senses the Tuntschi's connection to himself, to a mythical force and to the landscape. Wojnicz immediately recognizes the plurality of the being in front of him and acts accordingly. Unlike the others, he recognizes the agency the Tuntschi have and the accountability he holds when engaging with them.

At first, it might seem logical to interpret these mythical female-like figures as haunting the margins of the male-dominated world in a similar manner as Gliceria, Frau Opitz and the other female characters do as well. In part I concur with this reading, which can be concluded by analysing the Tuntschi according to Hartman's methodology. It appears that when the landscape can be perceived as a recognizable form – like a woman's body – the men can adjust their actions accordingly. There are

many examples of misogynistic reasonings in the novel, that legitimize using women – or more accurately women's bodies – specifically for their reproductive abilities.[47] Their presumed lack of profound intelligence e.g. places women lower on the hierarchical ladder than men, which entitles the latter to assert dominance over them in any way they please. This passage illustrates Dr. Semperweiss' comments on the dangers of seeing the world in binaries beautifully. Blind reliance on this conviction leads to the false assumption that one party possesses legitimate grounds for judging others as 'deviations', while simultaneously hiding behind these very principles.

The imperative here is to see and understand, like Wojnicz throughout the course of his stay, that perception has the powerful ability to bring the Other more closely to oneself, releasing one from the need to rely on normative definitions of the Other. The above-quoted passage not only objects to an archetypical representation of a woman's body as an object of lust, but the (unusual) corporeal form also underlines the limitations of cognitive abilities such as perception. In the following section, I will first explain how Tokarczuk represents other entities besides humans and how these non-human entities are always already implicated in our perception of the world. The result of this process is to perceive the (at times unexpected) "bonds that connect us, the similarities and sameness between us" (*The Tender Narrator* 24).

4.3 Non-human Presences

While Wojnicz contemplates the faith of the Tuntschi in front of him, he is kept on close watch by the we-narrators:

> "The forest seemed to have fallen silent, and to be watching this encounter between human being and something not human, but boldly pretending to be. Yes, everything was staring at him. He felt as if some ultra-vision were seeing through his hand-knitted pullover, his linen shirt and his cotton vest" (194).

His attentiveness to the surrounding presence arouses a feeling of great unease inside Wojnicz. He fears to be looked at in a similar manner to how he – as a man – is supposed to look at the Tuntschi. This probing vision of the narrators should not be understood as accusatory, but as Tokarczuk formulates it: "seeing everything means recognizing the ultimate fact that all things that exist are mutually connected into single whole, even if the connections between them are not yet known to us" (21). Wojnicz's

[47] Examples can be found on pages 71, 146, 216, 228, 235.

initial reaction to the Tuntschi demonstrates his awareness of “a completely different kind of responsibility for the world”, in which it is obvious that “a decision taken in one part of the world will have an effect in another part of it, and that differentiating between “mine” and “yours” starts to be debatable” (21). This sense of responsibility can be traced back to the passage in which Thilo teaches Mieczysław a particular way of seeing – which he calls *transparent looking* – that I have discussed in the previous chapter. This raises the question: what can be uncovered if one strains their eyes and overlooks a-priori assumptions? After a little practice, Mieczysław’s attention is suddenly caught by an undefined energy or presence in the scenery of the Henri met de Bles-painting.

In his metaphysical interpretation of Tokarczuk’s *Bieguni*, Werner describes this process as the ‘embodied cognition paradigm’. He explains that “the structures of the body are evolutionarily co-determined by the structures of surrounding entities”, which “is very clear when it comes to cognition, and in particular, perception” (446). In simple terms, Werner says that the sensory abilities of every actor’s body co-determine its interaction with reality and therefore with other actors, human or non-human. The same reality is translated in a significantly different manner according to the visual capabilities an entity possesses. This idea is thematized in *Empuzjon* as well in a conversation between Thilo and Mieczysław. “Landscape… is a great… mystery… because in fact… it takes shape… in the eyes… of the beholder…”, Thilo remarks (89). When we elevate landscape to an equal status with humans – considering both as actors in their own right – we might discover surprising capabilities, for example its healing properties in the world of Hans Castorp, or its ability to kill in *Empuzjon.*

The valid question could then be asked: how can we find connections between bodies, if ‘every body’ perceives the world differently? Keeping in mind Tokarczuk’s vehement critique of individualistic narratives, this would be a problematic reading. Drawing on ANT, I would rather argue that the creation of meaning is always an oscillation between the perception of one actor and the existence of another actor (or multiple actors). Thilo’s remark about landscape reminds Wojnicz of a question that puzzled him as a child, namely whether everyone actually sees the same colour of green or whether humankind has collectively agreed on the colour green regardless of their inner perceptive experience. Wojnicz concludes: “Green like a leaf – that was all that occurred to him. He could only talk about it through comparison, through analogy with something else” (89). This passage illustrates that the opposite is true: the

cognitive embodied paradigm does not produce individualistic narratives, but exists as a network of actors, all transmitting information. Green becomes green through measurable wavelengths as proposed by Thilo, the light of the sun, the analogy of grass and leaves, the construction of the iris, the taste of apples. Thus, perception is not bound to one specific actor but rather co-dependent on the whole network, which is so incredibly vast is can even transgress time. The we-narrators, for example, remark how: "[a] squirrel looks at the miracle of a nut and knows that it is pure, condensed time, that it is also its future, dressed in this strange form" (83). A focus on the we-narrators will elucidate how the cognitive embodied paradigm provides a valuable framework for analysing the author's representation of non-human entities.

The we-narrators as non-human presences

The novel's mythical atmosphere (supported by the numerous references to witches, gorgons and other mythical female figures) suggests a possible overlap between the omnipresent we-narrators and the Tuntschi. Without question, the we-narrators are the entities luring all the men to the forest each November and choosing an unwilling victim – as is revealed in a final encounter between Wojnicz and the narrators at the end of the novel. Still, their identities remain unknown. Herr Opitz and the coal burners hold the Tuntschi accountable, which begs the question why they continue their harmful practices. Thilo Von Hahn presents the readers with another viable option. On his deathbed Thilo notices that the line on his temperature chart is identical to the crests of the mountains outside of his window, and concludes: "I told you – here the landscape kills. This is the sort of place, one of very few in the world, where the landscape kills" (284). Tokarczuk has found a remarkable similarity between landscapes and women in the archive: both are inherently omnipresent, yet their presence is so commonly presumed that they are often overlooked.

To analyse how a landscape can obtain the ability to kill, I will turn to the concept of 'actor', as described by Bruno Latour. The concept of 'actor' in ANT should not be confused with 'agency', or 'one who acts'. The mere existence of an actor, human or non-human, broadcasts meaning into its surroundings, regardless of their understanding of accountability, free will or a sense of causality. Given Latour's social science background, applying ANT's complex methodology within literary studies raises valid concerns. However, with the peak of interest in ecocriticism, Latour's theories have reached the field of literary studies as well. His ANT does therefore not

directly concern itself with concepts such as canon or archive, but rather with relations of hierarchy. Latour's methodological framework enables a reconceptualization of the canon as a network, in which all entities are given a place. This reframing does not minimize the recognition of the oppressive forces a canon can inhibit, yet it encourages us to shift our fundamental attitude from resignation (or withdrawal) to possible reconnections. For Latour, the main aim is to dismantle the deeply embedded modern nature/culture binary, which, he argues, should be understood as a fabricated boundary rather than an immutable truth. These insights offer a valuable foundation to understand the tender narrator as managing "to encompass the perspective of each of the characters, as well as having the capacity to step beyond the horizon of each of them" (21).

Through the eyes of the we-narrators, the readers are able to observe a multitude of actors and their interactions all at once. The narrators act on their own account, for example: "Now we shall make an exception and leave Wojnicz to return to his room on his own (…) Let us instead follow Herr August upstairs to his south-facing room (…)" (219). They are knowledgeable about the inner worlds of these characters: they address August's self-frustration about the fact that "he is not writing his history of the world, a book that – it goes without saying – by not existing, is not going to throw this world to its knees" (id.). Moreover, the we-narrators continuously perceive interactions amongst humans or between humans and non-humans, such as Herr August and the mouse that is "surprised by the return of his enormous co-resident" (id.). Herr August, however, draws the wrong conclusion after the mouse (that is visible to him) vanishes, with the narrators remarking that he "is no longer aware of any other eyes watching him" (id.). At first glance, such a narration – especially in English which doesn't translate the grammatical form of the first plural feminine – seems virtually identical to a typical omniscient narrator. Yet the abilities of the we-narrators differ.

A line of thought from Latour's work may be helpful in gaining a better understanding of the narrators. On multiple occasions throughout the novel, the landscape – of which the narrators are part, or at least, closely related to – is compared to the stage of a theatre:

> "it feels as if they [i.e. the gentleman] are standing on a stage, as if this is the overture to an opera, and the spectators in this theatre are the trees, blueberry

bushes, moss-coated stones and some fluid, ill-defined presence that is moving like stream of warmer air among the mighty trunks, boughs and branches." (110)

The we-narrators' constant observation of the actors should not be understood as a passive submersion into the narrative, as if the narrators were merely the audience or the décor. It is true that the observation of a play is a defining point of theatre; it enables actors to perform on stage. Likewise, the landscape contributes to the completeness of the play. A convincing décor contributes to the suspension of disbelief of the audience. But in *Empuzjon,* those roles have gained capabilities unlike a traditional theatre setting. Tokarczuk ascribes the décor (especially trees) the abilities of an audience in this scene. At the same time, the narrators can interact with the actors before them and intervene in the course of the play whenever they like. To keep with the jargon of the theatre, the we-narrators are quite literally breaking the fourth wall in Wojnicz's understanding of reality when they engage with the actors "on stage."[48]

According to Latour, the genre of theatre is apt to present narratives in which human actors are decentred. In an interview for *The Theatre Times* with Sébastien Hendrickx and Kristof van Baarle, he explains: "Our point is not to erase but to 'stretch' the human in order to *include* the nonhuman. Actually, this has always been the case in the history of theatre. The human has always been de-centered by other forces like *faith* or *divinity* on stage, forces made visible by the text." Against this background, the boundaries between audience, décor and actors in *Empuzjon* cannot be interpreted as delineating. Rather, the novel presents the world as a holistic theatre hall, in which all entities regardless of their role in the play, contribute as equals and are co-dependent on each other to ensure its continuation. The characters in *Empuzjon,* especially Wojnicz and Thilo, become increasingly aware of this connection between non-human entities and themselves. The readers, however, are already aware of the presence of the we-narrators since the first page of the novel, and therefore know other presences can at any time intervene. From the very beginning, the border transgressing fourth-person narration hinders a "global" perception, in Latourian terms, in which humans view the earth from an elevated position. Therefore, this form of narration, guided by Mieczysław 's developing consciousness, greatly contributes to Tokarczuk's theoretical aim, stated in *The Tender Narrator,* of representing humans as "a small and at the same time

[48] In *The Tender Narrator,* Tokarczuk synonymously uses "a fourth-person" narrator when speaking of the tender narrator (21).

powerful part" of the world (25). This remark encompasses both a recognition of profound human influence on its environment and a consciousness of our relative insignificance within larger networks of relationships. This is illustrated in the long-anticipated encounter between Wojnicz and the we-narrators at the end of the novel.

When the suspense about Mieczysław's possibly imminent murder reaches its peak after Thilo's death in September, the parallel perspectives are brought together, partly revealing the identity of the narrators:

> "Right beside him he caught sight of a mossy face and the flash of a pair of moist eyes, dark green like an underground lake (…). It was joined by a second face, and then one more. Almost ceasing to breathe, he gazed at us with terror that gradually faded, for we wished him no harm. The poor human being could sense this, and with its free, bleeding hand touched our cheek, and felt that it was alive, that underneath there was a sort of body, not like its own, because our bodies have an experimental consistency, they are occasional, dependent on tides and air pressure, underground currents and transpiration" (310).

This revelation at the end of Empuzjon highlights the complexity and sophistication of Tokarczuk's writing. The passage skilfully alternates between the third-person singular ("he gazed at us") and the first-person plural ("we wished him no harm"), creating a bridge between these different viewpoints. The zenith of this scene is Wojnicz touching the narrators' bodies. Besides merging a singular and a plural perspective – whose genders are also challenged throughout this final passage – Tokarczuk unites Wojnicz and the narrators through the simple fact that they both have bodies that can touch and be touched. Their difference in appearance does not matter. On the contrary, emphasizing the mutability of the non-human body, respects the limitations and the abilities of their different bodies. More importantly, however, Tokarczuk showcases how any living creature, regardless of its humanness, can be represented by a recognizable corporeal form. Scholars such as Haraway have rightfully criticized a corporeal representation, warning for the anthropocentric 'gaze from nowhere', or in Haraway's terms 'the god trick' (581). Yet, this passage illustrates an alternative, in which the necessity of recognizable forms, like a body, is underlined while movement, like a change in perspective, is facilitated. Wojnicz is able to perceive the we-narrators as a living creature like himself, and understands its fundamental relationship to entities, which might at times be invisible to him. As such, Tokarczuk demonstrates the tension

and co-dependency that always exists between structure and movement, which on a metalevel can be transferred to the canon and the archive as well. This last passage is illustrative of the intrinsic relationship between canonical narratives and the ubiquity of marginalized presences in the archive. In *Empuzjon,* Tokarczuk focuses on representing narratives from the archive as embodied presences to underline their omnipresence in all canonical works. A change in perspective can facilitate critical awareness; enabling the reader to perceive, comprehend, and acknowledge one's own positionality within these narratives.

V. THE TENDER NARRATOR

Through the analysis of structure and movement, the previous two chapters have demonstrated the intricate balance Tokarczuk considers when engaging with canonical works such as Mann's *Der Zauberberg* and marginalized presences from the archive. This approach can be read as a call for an alternative for or rather a reconfiguration of our contemporary canon, which reiterates anthropocentric and homogenous ideologies. Indeed, in *Empuzjon,* Tokarczuk ridicules the state of stagnation in which the male characters – at least on the surface – find themselves. She acknowledges the benefits of a structure, which brings stability and recognition, yet she also advocates for the necessity of movement, of putting oneself in the place of the Other or even merging with other entities. Her archetypal female characters, for example, leave ample room for imagined lives – no reader would believe the absurd remarks about them made by the men at the guesthouse. To accomplish such a complicated task, *Empuzjon* is in part narrated by peculiar we-narrators that exemplify one of the many ways in which non-humans could possibly be represented. Tokarczuk presses, that it is our responsibility to be aware of these presences. Through her approach of tender narration, Tokarczuk presents reality as a network of co-dependence instead of a rigid, inherently hierarchical structures. And yet the novel ends in the gruesome death of Herr Opitz. How can we understand the contradiction between Tokarczuk's tender poetics and this sacrificial ritual?

It is clear that the climax of the novel is modelled after the story of Abraham and Isaac, which plays a significant role in Thilo's explanation of his 'transparent looking' technique. Both stories revolve around the sacrifice of a young, innocent boy (Isaac vs. Wojnicz) which is stopped at the last second. This interruption, in both cases, hinges on a change of perspective, as both God as well as the we-narrators change their minds after (quite literally) having seen through respectively Abraham and Mieczysław . The former has proven his steadfast belief in God, the latter has accepted his body for what it is. This parable serves as an appropriate starting point for discussing Empuzjon in relation to the prevalent conceptions of literary influence, as propagated by Harold Bloom and Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar.

5.1 A Patricidal Reading

Bloom's theory on literary influence resounds in the biblical narrative of a father-son sacrifice. In a reading of *Empuzjon* through this lens, valid arguments can be made for interpreting Tokarczuk's novel as a 'patricide' of Mann. Herr Opitz can be interpreted as exemplary of the traditional, misogynist viewpoints, while the we-narrators represent a new, polyvocal way of storytelling. Bloom's introduction of violence and familial relations between authors has been so influential, that even Tokarczuk reflects on her novel in this way. For example, in an interview for the European Literature Prize, Margot Dijkgraaf asked the author whether she loves Thomas Mann. Tokarczuk answers: "[t]his is the kind of love from a daughter for a father, while the father is completely out of touch, doesn't pay attention to you, left you, doesn't notice you". This phrasing is reminiscent of Bloom's main contribution to the discourse on literary influence: the *anxiety* felt by new poets towards their sources of inspiration. This anxiety underlies a "fear of separation", because new poets must leave the comfort of the established creative styles and venture out on their own. This results into a "compulsion neurosis, or an anxiety necessarily towards any danger that might *end* him as a poet" (58). If Tokarczuk, incited by this primal instinct to fend of danger, truly murders her 'father poet' Mann however, is hard to say. Following Bloom's theory to the letter, a fundamental problem arises: Tokarczuk is a female author. Her gender would automatically exclude her from seriously challenging a male canonical author.

Nonetheless, entertaining the idea that Bloom uses a generic masculine form in *Anxiety of Influence, Empuzjon* can be read as an intentional misinterpretation of *Der Zauberberg.* Bloom states that the *clinamen* – a swerve, misprision or misreading of the already canonical author – is the "central working concept of the theory of Poetic Influence"(42). Such a misinterpretation is not a negative attitude of the new poet towards the greatness of his precursor, but rather a careful sidestep from the path on which the precursor has led the new poet. He's showcasing his respect for the work, whilst simultaneously 'swerving' into a new direction. Because of its resemblance to *Der Zauberberg, Empuzjon* can undeniably be read as a novel that initially follows into the footsteps of Mann. The setting of the novel, the coming-of-age narrative, the philosophical questions about are all influenced by Mann's work. However, already from the title onwards, *Empuzjon* profiles itself as an independent narrative with its own original premise. With a hint of sarcasm, Tokarczuk describes the motivation for her

swerve from Mann in her interview with Antonia Lloyd-Jones as: “[t]he classics are full of men discussing serious matters and enduring existential dilemmas, while women are hidden in the background in their social roles, worrying about a burnt pudding or an unfashionable hat, doing their best to be a good mother, an attractive lover, or a resourceful wife. *The Magic Mountain* is an example of one of these great books without women, written in its time and with the characteristics of that time.”

There is however a significant difference that makes Tokarczuk’s work incompatible with a patricidal reading though the lens of Bloom. According to the latter, literary influence is an important mechanism for canon formation, because “poetry will be self-slain, murdered by its own past strength” (10). In other words: the canon is characterized by attrition warfare, a continuous wearing-down of other poets. Tokarczuk, on the contrary, presents a more nuanced interpretation of literature and literary influence, stating: “Literature is built on tenderness toward any being other than ourselves”(22). Opposite to Bloom, Tokarczuk prefers construction and collaboration over deconstruction and competition. A violent reading of *Empuzjon* would undermine any form of dialogue with Mann (or for that matter, any canonical author referenced). Whereas Bloom confides himself strictly to the dominant literary canon, Tokarczuk continuously aims to incorporate voices which less means to violently overthrow their predecessor. Perhaps, a feminist interpretation could nuance this conclusion slightly.

5.2 A Feminist Reading

The parable of Abraham and Isaac has a slightly different ending than the sacrifice-passage in *Empuzjon.* Mieczysław is released by the we-narrators, just as Isaac is spared by an angel sent by God and replaced with a ram. Abraham is praised for his fortitude and faith in God, yet Herr Opitz, fulfilling a similar role in *Empuzjon,* eventually falls victim to the we-narrator’s wrath. Following the argumentative line of Gilbert and Gubar, the we-narrators can be interpreted as a variation on the ‘madwoman in the attic’ trope. Emblematic for the discounted feminine and non-human perspectives, the we-narrators avenge themselves on the proprietor of the Guesthouse, where a continuous stream of misogynist comments are preserved and women are continuously treated violently. Unlike the examples provided by Gilbert and Gubar from nineteenth-century female authors, in *Empuzjon* the we-narrators actually triumph over the embodiment of misogynist ideals and secure their presence within the main

narrative. The narrators have ominously prophesized this earlier in the novel, when they stated: “People should get used to the fact that they are being watched” (25).

Consistent with Gilbert and Gubar’s observation about literary stereotypes, the female characters in *Empuzjon* are predominantly represented as haunting presences, which are often reduced to their societal roles as nurses, mothers or caregivers. In their need for a more emancipatory society, nineteenth century authors needed to (symbolically) murder such characters to obstruct identification with them.[49] In *Empuzjon,* the female characters can likewise roughly be divided into the categories of either ‘angel’ or ‘witch’, and regardless of their roles, many of them meet terrible faiths. For nineteenth century authors, a certain degree of secrecy was however imperative to still ensure themselves of a place in the literary canon. Hence, a fragmented literary canon is created, in which the responsibility of reading this transformed representation of female characters lies with female authors and audiences. Just as the diverging ending of the sacrificial ritual, *Empuzjon* takes it one step further than the works from the nineteenth century. The responsibility of understanding the shallowness of archetypes is transferred to the male characters in the novel. They are ridiculed for their naivety and superficial knowledge of women.

In this subverted universe, Tokarczuk opposes Gilbert and Gubar’s theory of ‘anxiety of authorship’. On account of the satirical tone of the novel, the female characters although represented as archetypes should be understood as leading full lives. In combination with the triumph of the ‘madwoman’ at the end of the novel, Tokarczuk presents female authorship as an established fact rather than a pursuit, that incites anxiety. Yet, this interpretation of *Empuzjon* would still result into a fragmented literary canon, in which the influence of canonical male writers is cast aside. The distinction suggested by Gilbert and Gubar about initiated readership might be too rigid for an apt interpretation of *Empuzjon.* In the literary canon of the nineteenth century, encoded tropes such as the madwomen in the attic would either have been understood as critique on societal roles or simply as a literary topos. Any form of ambiguity would have greatly undermined the purpose of the trope.

Incomprehensibility, ambiguity, unreadability are all prevalent themes in *Empuzjon,* as is most clearly demonstrated in the character of Mieczysław. Besides

[49] See chapter 10: ‘A Dialogue of Self and Soul: Plain Jane’s Progress’ for an elaborate discussion of the ‘madwoman’-trope. Chapter 14: ‘George Eliot as the Angel of Destruction’ discusses the ‘angel’-trope.

his ambiguous body, Mieczysław learns throughout his stay that in-betweenness creates opportunities rather than limitations. Dr. Semperweiss for example proposes the following to Wojnicz: “I urge you to create your own fiction, one that says it’s you that’s perfect, for instance”(293). Instead of conforming to societal standards and labelling his body as ‘imperfect’ or ‘faulty’, Dr. Semperweiss encourages Wojnicz to view his body as multi-interpretable. Ambiguity present the possibility of discussion, in which both similarities as well as differences can be found. Therefore, proposing to read the novel as a narrative, that specifically excludes male perspectives, would invalidate the message of *Empuzjon* of presenting an interconnected worldview. Following a similar pattern of my critique on Bloom, this reading proves too limited to account for the full scope and complexity of *Empuzjon,* which I have outlined in the previous chapters. Could then a tender reading of *Empuzjon* create an understanding of literary influence as a key component of a participatory network rather than an exclusionary competition?

5.3 A Tender Reading

After Tokarczuk explains her conflicting relationship to Mann, the interview by Margot Dijkgraaf continues as follows:

> “MD: You loved The Magic Mountain in the beginning, but then you started to hate it. And then, this is your revenge. The book is your revenge.
>
> OT: If you want to put it like that, perhaps.”

Tokarczuk’s answer encapsulates the message of ambiguity that is so prevalent in *Empuzjon*. Besides doubting whether her relationship with Mann can be defined in binary terms of love and hate, an interpretation based on either of those two values is even more questionable. Approaching the heritage of canonical authors such as Mann through Tokarczuk’s thematization of structure, movement and perception, results in a reading that underlines the ambiguity of literary influence. Canonical works are simultaneously respected and appreciated, as well as challenged and subverted.

A theoretical articulation of the tender narrator might guide us in understanding the last scene of the novel differently. Concretely, a tender narrator can incorporate multiple perspectives at once including the inner worlds of non-human entities such as animals, plants or even a complete forest. This capability to transgress boundaries also extends to a textual level, as the tender narrator can be represented in any

(unconventional) grammatical form such as a first person plural feminine form. Consequently, the tender narrator points out that structures, that both confine narratives within its limits and reiterate exclusionary practices, are arbitrary. However, the aim of tender narration is to connect: their focus on movement and co-dependency presents the world as a holistic network in which all entities play a part.

What is the role of violence in an interconnected world? In her speech, Tokarczuk has commented on the devastations caused by forms of oppression, (physical) altercations and deceitful political strategies. In her own words: “there is something wrong with the world” (14). But if Tokarczuk truly opposes violence, how can the gruesome demise of Herr Opitz as a sacrifice to the we-narrators be explained? Through a close reading of the sacrifice-scene, it will become clear how Tokarczuk wields a different definition of violence, that is commensurable with her tender poetics.

After being lured to the forest and denied as a sacrifice by the we-narrators Mieczysław returns to the Guesthouse unscathed. There he discovers Herr Opitz strapped down in an enforced chair. The proprietor begs Wojnicz to release him from his entrapment and assures him the young boy is in fact saving his life. Then, he joins a procession of inebriated men until the edge of the forest:

> “Opitz stood alone at the edge of a small clearing, stooping a little, as if preparing to toss a weight onto his shoulders. He was breathing heavily, and each breath chilled his ailing lungs – after all, he was as sick as the others – before escaping in a little grey cloud into the frosty air, for the full moon had brought the winter with it” (320).

Herr Opitz’s death is described as following:

> “There was nothing violent about it – just a fast, almost imperceptible motion, which left poor Opitz hanging above the ground. The expression painted on his face was one that we had never seen before: sorrow. He must have known what was going to happen” (320).

The scholars I have discussed before, Bloom and Gilbert and Gubar – but also Hartman – all presuppose a linear temporality in their theories. A common denominator in these theories is that the distinction between definitive states – alive or dead, remembered or forgotten – appears to hinge on a demarcated moment of violence. For Hartman, violence is a singular point in time that can reveal someone’s existence,

albeit as a mention in brief obituary in a ship's log. For Bloom violence marks the moment when the student surpasses his master. Gubar and Gilbert even underline the necessity of violence against any deviance of social expectations, which they consider an unchangeable criterium for adaption into the main-stream canon. Yet Tokarczuk argues that transformation is the only constant: time passes, knowledge accumulates, experiences layer upon one another. Her novel refuses any form of categorization, is an amalgam of genres and narrators, incorporates feminine, queer, and non-human perspectives. As such, the description of Herr Opitz's death as non-violent is in line with the rest of the narrative.

When considering Herr Opitz's faith, it is important to keep in mind Tokarczuk's representation of a world without a hierarchical relationship between life and death. All characters in *Empuzjon* are presented on a spectrum between these extremes, ranging from embodied presences to spectral recollections. By questioning boundaries of literary structures such as genre, social structures such as gender and even epistemological boundaries such as the nature/culture divide, Tokarczuk requires her readers to see Herr Opitz's death as a transformation rather than a definitive state. This will become more clear when we take the following explanation of Thilo about the offering of Isaac into consideration. He says:

> "Abraham killed his first-born son, because that's what God wanted him to do. In the Bible it's clear. It says that Abraham returned from Mount Moriah alone, with just his servant" (201).

Once again, Thilo proposes a different reading of a well-known narrative and points out an inconsistency, which could only be noticed if the reader suspends its knowledge of the ending of the story for a moment. A reading of Herr Opitz's death as an act of revenge, whether on Thomas Mann personally or the whole misogynist, Western canon, would be a straightforward interpretation. Being mindful of the risk of overanalysing, I would agree that this interpretation is accurate. But Thilo continues:

> (…) We think of sacrifice as a dreadful, barbaric thing, but it's we who think like that, we who are living today.(…) After all, making a sacrifice is an expression of one's own strength and power over the world. You share the world with God, you let him nip off a bit of it, and in doing so you undermine God's greatness and strength. Why should God want sacrifices when he can take whatever he likes? Why should he be given something when he possesses it all anyway?" (201).

Thilo's perspective on the act of sacrifice shines a different light on Herr Opitz's unfortunate demise. Judging by their abilities, the we-narrators could have murdered Herr Opitz (or any other person for that matter), whenever it would have pleased them. As Thilo explains, sacrifice as a ritual transforms a non-human demand into a human choice, transferring agency to the person performing the act. Violence was therefore never required in Herr Opitz's renewed relationship to the non-human we-narrators, or in Thilo's phrasing, he has gained a "sense of [his] own causality in the face of God" (201). Yet, in *Empuzjon* death is never permanent.

Building upon the two previous interpretations of *Empuzjon,* but incorporating Tokarczuk's promotion of ambiguity, I would suggest reading Herr Opitz's death as a voluntary sacrifice of the male, homogenous and anthropocentric canon to a representation of other perspectives. In line with Assmann's definition of the canon as "a notorious shortage of space"(100), Tokarczuk (humorously) summarizes the discussions between the men as "each presenting his position as though pulling the topic over to his side, like a too-small quilt" (213). Deciding which information, canonical or archival, deserves a rightful place in the literary canon is therefore challenging.[50] The sacrificial act of Herr Opitz demonstrates the archive's key strength. The archive enables the complete decontextualization of any cultural object, permitting their subsequent revaluation and reintegration within alternative frameworks. This capacity allows us to temporarily shelve works from male, homogenous, anthropocentric traditions, filtering out harmful elements. Yet, their artistic merit can remain accessible for appreciation. In conclusion, Herr Opitz can indeed be read as a sacrifice of male, anthropocentric ideologies. Yet, firstly, this is not a passive act and secondly, it is a promise of a better return. Tokarczuk's ending of the novel proposes a canon formation, that does not prioritize violence as an act of destruction. On the contrary, violence, in this case, simply elucidated a point of friction between stagnated, traditional conventions and the presences that are systematically overlooked. This constructive act of sacrifice allows for a temporary shift in perspective, where other presences can be visible. In this paradigm, the relationship between canon and archive is released of its hierarchical understanding, and can be seen as complementary concepts.

[50] When asked by Margot Dijkgraaf about the inclusion of the author's note at the end of the novel, Tokarczuk remarks: "I made the list because I knew that nobody would believe me. (…) In the books of our beloved writers!"

Instead Tokarczuk points out a danger larger than violence: ignorance. Herr Opitz is not criticized for his choice to sacrifice himself, nor is he ridiculed. Yet, the witnesses to Herr Opitz's death are singled out for their short-sightedness on the event, that unfolds before their eyes:

> "The rest, the few who were close by, watched it all from among the trees as if awakened, with distinct relief: so it isn't me! – und undoubtedly this was cruel on their part" (320).

Their unwavering belief that death is final and systematic dismissal of anything they cannot see, traps them in stagnation. In contrast, the tender narrator articulates a world in terms designed to motivate in readers a sense of responsibility towards it. Tenderness and violence are not incommensurable; tenderness and stagnation are.

VI. CONCLUSION

In a time deprived of social cohesion, Tokarczuk advocates for tenderness, being “the most modest form of love” (24). In this thesis I have investigated in what way Tokarczuk’s poetics provide an alternative, non-violent understanding of literary influence, and what the possible consequences are for the contemporary canon formation process. Contrary to the theories proposed by scholars such as Harold Bloom, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, the approach Tokarczuk has undertaken in relation to canonical works such as Mann’s *Der Zauberberg* can be understood as inquisitive rather than violent. Similar to the rest of her oeuvre, *Empuzjon* can be characterized as a novel constantly transgressing boundaries. To elucidate this, I have analysed the tension and mutual dependency between structure and movement within the novel, which I have linked to the canon and the archive.

Tokarczuk acknowledges the innate human tendency to rely on the safety of structures. Yet, viewing the world as a self-contained system where humans hold a dominant position, can foster indifference towards marginalized groups (in this thesis, often ‘Other’) who exist outside this privileged sphere. A canon as a stable set of narratives is an example of such a structure, which both provides a sense of security and perpetuates the circulation of outdated ideologies. Olga Tokarczuk has sought to interrogate the stability of this structure in a literary sense. From the very beginning, namely the title, Tokarczuk entangles recognizable structures with presences, that provoke the readers’ imagination. Likewise the genre and the narration of the novel refuse any easy categorization and therefore obstruct the established canon formation process. A closer analysis of the interferences within the main narrative through the theories of Saidiya Hartman and Bruno Latour revealed how Tokarczuk not only attributes more codetermination and therefore agency to women and non-human but also points out that that they have always been present beneath the surface. This line of thought brings Tokarczuk to the main message of the novel. Görbersdorf and the men at the Guesthouse present a fixed slate, against which any form of movement can be traced, if one pays attention.

The readers of *Empuzjon* are taught a new way of looking, guided by Mieczysław in a similar fashion as Hans Castorp in *Der Zauberberg,* and by the meta-comments of the mysterious we-narrators. From this point of view, the world is presented as an interconnected network, reliant on of the ongoing support of numerous

actors in order to sustain themselves and their environment. A tender narration can amplify these diverse voices, embody them as recognizable forms to others, and reveal the many perspectives that shape our contemporary world. This raises the question, what role violence could possible hold in a mutually dependent network?

As demonstrated by the last passage of *Empuzjon,* Tokarczuk by no means denies the existence of violence or its possible consequences. Other than Bloom, Gubar and Gilbert, and Hartman however, Tokarczuk's narrative approach of the tender narrator does not abide by linear temporality, which explains why Herr Opitz's death is described as 'non-violent', even though his body is mutilated by the we-narrators. Rather than a demarcated moment in time, often associated with a form of destruction, Tokarczuk proposes to see Herr Opitz's violent death as a moment of transformation. Emblematic for traditional, masculine and anthropocentric values, Herr Opitz's sacrifice to the we-narrators can be interpreted as a voluntary relegation to the archive. Understanding the canon and the archive as complementary concepts, such as structure and movement, offers an interpretation, in which frictional ideologies have the chance to be reconsidered and reassessed in different contexts, while creating room for other perspectives in the meantime. Knowing deep down, that as always in Tokarczuk's works, they will resurface.

VII. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Eero Järnefelt – Under the Yoke (Burning the Brushwood), Ateneum Helsinki (A I 514), 164 x 131 cm, oil on canvas.

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