

Olga Tokarczuk's Art of Reading: A Linguistic View

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to analyze the process of reading shown from different perspectives in Olga Tokarczuk's essay *Palec w soli, czyli Krótka historia mojego czytania* (*A Finger in the Salt, or A Short History of My Reading*). The authors examine how the writer understands the process of reading, how she captures the category of the reader, and what role the imagination of the recipient plays in this process. They seek answers to questions such as what the history of the Nobel laureate's reading is, how she describes the process considered "the miracle of reading," and which literary works shaped her as a reader, a writer, or a person who discovers successive layers of the world through reading. The article portrays reading as an interweaving of primordial dichotomies: reading as a skill and process in human development versus reading as a process in the life of a writer; and of secondary dichotomies involving different criteria: age, gender, text type, and reader. As a result of the use of lexical-stylistic instrumentation, linguistic means of expression that sometimes form surprising combinations have been analyzed, making the text appear, to use a metaphor, as a kind of mosaic composed of different words and meanings that form a coherent and stimulating whole. The analysis shows that the mosaic character of the text manifests at its various levels. Olga Tokarczuk speaks about reading in scientific, popular and erudite language, with idiolectal elements and those belonging to the emotional register of everyday language. The distinction of unusual, even surprising collocation combinations and metaphors is an expression of the writer's creativity.

Keywords: essay; Olga Tokarczuk; reading as a process; the reader; linguistic and stylistic analysis

INTRODUCTION

Olga Tokarczuk is one of the most important contemporary Polish writers. Her numerous literary awards include The Man Booker International Prize 2018 for the novel *Flights*, she is also a two-time winner of the Nike Literary Award for the novels *Flights* and *The Books of Jacob*, and a Nobel laureate "for a narrative imagination that with encyclopedic passion represents the crossing of boundaries as a form of life" <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2018/tokarczuk/facts/> (Prize motivation). She is a writer who, through each of her stories, compels the reader to ponder

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about the meaning of life. The current and at the same time universal themes she tackles in her work, recalling experiences shared by all people, make her subsequent novels appreciated by both critics and readers. Interweaved into her stories are problems of life, its passing, and overcoming death. She reminds the reader that one needs to "be on a journey throughout one's life". Researchers emphasize that her work can be described as engaged literature, as it addresses socially and culturally important topics for the contemporary world, original in language, style, and genre (cf. Kantner 2019, Rejter 2017, Austin & Hanus & Austin 2022, Sobczak 2024). The authors of the latest publication "Olga Tokarczuk. Comparative Perspectives" (Wiśniewska & Lipski (eds.) 2023) discuss issues significant to Tokarczuk's work, which are accurately captured in a review of the volume: "The authors of the anthology, passing the boundaries of traditional comparative literature, highlight the epistemological aspect of Tokarczuk's work, the way of understanding the 'bizarreness,' as well as the sources of her aesthetics" (Sobczak, 2023, pp. 255).

Katarzyna Kantner, the author of the first monograph on the Nobel laureate's work, emphasizes the role of literary discourse and the power of words, writing that through the lens of Tokarczuk's literature "she looks at what language does to us – how it excludes, appropriates, distorts, hurts; how it subjects us to its power and the mechanisms we are unaware of" (Kantner, 2019, p. 14, own translation).

Tokarczuk's narrative imagination and scientific attention to detail made us reflect on reading, as elaborated on in the essay *A finger dipped in salt, or a short history of my reading* (Tokarczuk, 2020b), which is a representative example of the aforementioned theme, as it is entirely devoted to reading. Already the title of the essay quite intrigues the reader. The writer explains succinctly that dipping a finger in salt while reading is related to an old Jewish custom: "in the yeshiva, in front of students who studied the Torah intensively, there were placed bowls of salt so that they could dip their licked fingers in them and then taste the salt crystals on them" (p. 107). Such intuitive behaviour also accompanied the author herself, especially while reading long novels. It is worth nothing that although it is difficult to find in scientific sources an explanation of the tradition of dipping a finger in salt, while reading the Torah, it should be emphasized that salt is of great importance in the Jewish tradition and religion. Salt was included in the sacrificial offering in the Temple, symbolizing the eternal covenant between God and Israel. Salt and bread were the first to be brought into the new home, guests were greeted with salt and bread, as salt protects against evil charm (see the entry *salt* Unterman, 1994, pp. 255-256).

In this article, we intend to examine Olga Tokarczuk's reading history, how she describes the process considered to be the "miracle of reading," and which works have molded her as a reader, a writer, and a human being peeling, through reading, layer after layer of the world, a person with a calling to read.

The questions we pose concern the issue of what kind of reader the Nobel laureate herself is and what the images of the contemporary reader might be. The writer, discussing her own readings, considers how a reader can use their imagination in the process of interpreting literary texts. The key to describing her reading process is conducting an analysis of the lexical layer and the stylistic devices and metaphors used, which illustrate reading in diverse multi-faceted conditions. We have already analyzed Tokarczuk's vision of the tender narrator (cf. Bilut-Homplewicz, Krauz, 2022); in this article, we want to show the active reader.

The art of reading, especially literary divisions, is a matter of universal concern, so we believe that the description of individual reading and the analysis of how works are interpreted presented in the essay by Olga Tokarczuk may be of interest to receivers and literature readers.

THE PROCESS OF READING – DIFFERENT POINTS OF VIEW

The cult of books, the art of reading, and the therapeutic role of reading have been known for centuries and appreciated since antiquity. The therapeutic role of books is evidenced by both the thoughts embedded in sententias (e.g. the inscription on the portal at the entrance to the Library of Alexandria: *Psychiastreion* (a sanatorium for the mind), philosophers' statements, and praise of important works found in ancient and contemporary literature. From the beginning, it has been stressed that reading is a cure for loneliness, a way of communing with the minds of outstanding intellectuals, bringing them to life after centuries, and – as Mikołaj Rej argued in *The Life of a Good Man (Żywot człowieka poczciwego)* – “it perfects people, prepares them for life, and educates” (cited in Wichowa, 2013, p. 54). Analyzing examples from the literary canon, Maria Wichowa concludes that book therapy gave satisfactory results in diverse cases when it came to healing the reader's soul. It satisfied the reader's intellectual needs, boosted education, refined the sense of aesthetics, helped find answers to the problems related to the cause of his or her spiritual impotence, and at the same time, provided lighter nourishment, e.g. “entertainment or aesthetic satisfaction” (p. 65).

It is best to start by looking at the process of reading from different points of view. We briefly recall the findings of Polish researchers on reading as a process. According to literary critics (see Uniłowski, 2013), reading is associated with an evaluation of literary works, with the division not only into literature of a better and worse kind, but also with revealing the difference of opinions. The most important feature of criticism is, however, the differentiation of reading. Krzysztof Uniłowski distinguishes three sides of the reading process: the reader, the book and its author, and the third person for whom we read. He therefore sees reading as “staging communication” (p. 16). The researcher emphasizes that “even when immersing myself in reading, absorbing it with flushed face fully engaging in it and forgetting about God's world, I am at the same time ‘carrying out my duty’” (Uniłowski, 2013, p. 16).

The importance of reading literature is emphasized by both educators and literary scholars. Anna Nasiłowska writes that “[r]eading literature should be treated as an integrating subject, and not a separate field of science; it is a remedy for the progressive breakdown into individual areas and at the same time an initiation conducive to spiritual development for the entire life ahead” (Nasiłowska 2012, p. 386). According to the researcher, reading literary works releases the potential for thinking, promotes the development of spirituality, develops the ability to reflect, teaches expression and empathy. Nasiłowska notes that “Teaching the skill of reading serves not the past, but the future” (p. 388). Thomas Foster (2003) makes interesting observations about ways of interpreting a literary text. The author of the bestselling guide draws attention to the ways of reading the content, symbols, and searching for such a reading perspective that will allow to see the text in the light of the historical, social cultural background, as well as from the perspective of an individual reading experience.

Without denying the role of reading in deepening knowledge, shaping experiences and emotions, Tokarczuk underscores the role of psychological mechanisms enabling the reader to enter new worlds, a new reality, considering reading to be the privilege of a healthy mind. In psychological studies, reading is considered to be the most important human skill, and becoming a reader is a complex process that begins with the development of human language skills and leads to the acquisition of reading skills understood in a comprehensive way (cf. e.g. Król, 1982; Taboń, 2005; Rayner, Pollatsek, Ashby, & Clifton, 2012; Madeja-Bień, 2016).

The psychological perspective of looking at the “mysterious ability to read” (p. 94) is important for the writer and psychologist. The Nobel laureate writes: “So far, psychologists have established that the ability to read effectively is one of the signs of mental health. Fruitful reading is one connected with understanding and experiencing what is read. We do not read in moments of agitation or stress. People suffering from psychosis lose this ability almost completely. Reading is, therefore, the privilege of a healthy, balanced mind” (p. 94-95).

When describing the story of her reading, Tokarczuk does not adopt the role of a critic, but considers instead the experiences of all readers – compares their range of vocabulary, all the time bearing in mind the three elements that condition the process. These include: the writer (his or her personality and the way of layering mystery), the book (its content, language and the mystery), and the reader – the most important element in the reading process. Remembering her early experience of reading, she attempts to explain the mystery of reading, the way books change the reader, the readers change books, and the way successive acts of interpretation serve to discover successive layers of the world. She is interested in the mature and attuned reader (his or her features include: noticing more, seeing in advance, interpreting endlessly, deeper and deeper, receptive, giving different meanings, creating alternative worlds) (Tokarczuk, 2020b, p. 96-97). The writer, creator is the one who opened the author of the essay to the miracle of reading, that is, “to patiently delve into the multi-story, complex structure of the world around me through the conscious use of language, through the play of signs, contexts, references, to constant going down, or maybe going up, winding stairs of ambiguous images” (p. 111).

METHODS

The methods used in the article are of a textological and stylistic-textological as well as stylistic profile as contemporary methods of stylistic research, thanks to the development of linguistic textology, which allow for the extension of the research subject. It is no longer merely a formal description of stylistic devices. The analysis includes the following steps: reading strategies, the definition of the reading process, listing the dichotomies that make up the reading process, and analyzing the stylistic devices. The analyses also consider additional categories, primarily the category of the author, his or her intentions and choices leading to the characteristic use of the linguistic code (style devices and rhetorical figures). The projected recipient in the person of the reader also becomes important. He or she is treated as the co-creator of the text. In the process of reception, the reader deciphers the way the text is organized and interprets the motivations behind the sender’s stylistic choices, combining the analysis of stylistic exponents with textual competences. The concepts of text and *style* interweave at different levels of the analysis which results in the treatment of style as an integral category (Gajda, 1996, p. 5). It is a category “integrating the structural elements of an utterance with its subject, its concept of the world and system of values as well as its broadly understood context: situational, textual and cultural” (Witosz, 2009, p. 10). In effect, the linguistic analysis of the text as a comprehensive message (see Fix 2005, Heinemann 2010) leads not only to a description of formal style markers, but also provides answers to the questions about the shape of the narrative and the effects of the author’s employment of a specific code. The semantic layer and the way of perceiving reality are also important.

The analyzed essay was presented to the reader as a thematically shaped textual whole in which comprehensive problem of *reading* was presented by Olga Tokarczuk as a process in human life and as an individual experience in the author's life. Preliminary considerations about reading, coming from different research perspectives, are presented synthetically, while in the analysis included in the section *The author's means of expression – linguistic and stylistic aspect*, we apply the methodology of text linguistics and stylistics. According to these approaches, the text emerges as a whole, composed of thematically related with each other individual parts, characterized by specific stylistic features. This approach to the text as a holistically treated macro sign brings interesting results of the analysis on specific textual examples – here on the example of the essay of the Polish Nobel Prize winner, which is characterized by creativity both on the level of content and language, including style. Two main parts of the text have been distinguished, constituted by a thematic dichotomy (reading as a process in human life and reading in the life of the author). Attention is also drawn to the interweaving of Tokarczuk's erudite deliberations with marked fragments of the text that separates the above-mentioned parts. The textological and stylistic approach makes it possible to distinguish several dichotomies, and the text as a whole has been described as their interweaving.

The methodology in the field of stylistics plays an important role in the analyzed essay, in which the isolation and description of various language registers of language constitutes an important part of stylistic investigations. However, the analysis is not so much about identifying selected units representing specific registers, but about the interweaving of various registers in the essay, related to colloquial, specialized and erudite language, which are connected, on the one hand, with the reflections on reading and, on the other hand, are a result of Tokarczuk's experience as a psychologist and a writer. The essay is not a stylistically uniform text, and yet it is a coherent whole due to the author's intention which combines stylistic diversity with the approach to the comprehensive reading process, thus the text is an interesting challenge for both the linguist and the reader.

THE HISTORY OF HER READING – WHAT IS OLGA TOKARCZUK'S READING LIST

Tokarczuk recommends reading not for educational purposes, but for self-development. In the essay, she recalls the path she took to become a “passionate reader” (p. 110) and a writer. She recalls a group of literary classics that make up her Library of Polish and Foreign Classics, and it includes works that not only have accompanied the future writer and Nobel Prize winner for years but have also played an important role in the history of literature and in the development of genres. The collection consists of works in various genres: first there are fairy tales that develop children's imagination and sensitivity, later Jan Parandowski's myths, Jules Verne's travel books and the fascination with discovering unknown lands, solving mysteries and puzzles, then the epistolary love novel by Jean Jacques Rousseau *Julie; or, The New Heloise* which, “despite the didactic tone, created a model of a new sensitivity” (Szenes, 1994, p. 50) and *The Saragossa Manuscript*, an encyclopedic novel the modernity of which can be spotted in “the theatrical style, the polyphony of the narrative, the irony surrounding each sentence, humor and comedy, as well as in the sense of conventionality of literature” (Wasilewska, 2015). By constructing a canon known to the modern recipient (because it is composed of required school reading), she also shows her experience which comes from reading the same works multiple times when the subsequent creative readings provide pleasure and help discover the stages of looking at a text. This is how she formulates the reading experience related to an important, and perhaps the most important novel

for her – *The Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann, simultaneously discovering strategies for understanding, interpreting and evaluating a text / literature:

- the first reading focused on the content, the novel “seemed to me to be deadly serious and sad.

Poor naive Castorp, torn between two demonic beings: Naphta and Settembrini, finds himself on one side or the other of their ongoing dispute. Their conversations were difficult and demanding for me; no wonder the encyclopedia was in constant use.” (102);

- the second – “it was sensual, domestic, lined with longing for the world, in which long sentences are built, and whose regularity induces a trance. Subtle psychological play, gestures, expressions, maneuvers, and glances. Theories that serve not to explain the world, but to build one's own identity, always full of hidden motivations.” (102);

- the third – “it gave me a lot of entertainment, because I unexpectedly saw the grotesque dimension of this novel. Castorp turned into a cunning trickster with a magic wand, which, wherever it appears, creates a puppet theater before our eyes.” (102).

The stylistic analysis of Olga Tokarczuk’s *Flights* conducted by Karina Belén Durán confirms the thesis that reading can be divided into several stages. The first reading is usually associated with the main events of the work, while the second is linked to interpretation, always within the text's boundaries, performed by the reader who actively constructs and generates meanings, incorporating their imagination into this process (Durán 2021).

Tokarczuk even suggests reading the same book every eight or ten years to see how much its understanding changes. In this way, Tokarczuk signals an evolution in reading which can be understood as betterment of reading and at the same time, as one’s own reading development. It is worth noting that Mann’s novel accompanies the Nobel Prize winner to this day. Direct references to this novel can be found in her latest work, *Empuzjon* (2022).

IN TOKARCZUK’S UNDERSTANDING, READING IS A PROCESS

Tokarczuk pays attention to the reading process, “The condition of which (...) is the prior mastery of the ability to use human language” (p. 95). It begins with the simple ability to glide across the letters, which leads to reading for pleasure, combining this fact with a personal choice and, finally, the choice of reading that opens up other worlds for the reader. She concludes: “One reads in order to experience – this is a deeper, more valuable kind of understanding” (p. 104).

The author emphasizes the reader's commitment (to delve into the novel, absorb, learn to extract music and pictures from the chains of letters – pp. 95-96, to remain in love with the written word – p. 96), she shows the effects of early reading of literature: “And if a man has not experienced the almost erotic pleasure of reading, say, between the ages of nine and sixteen, he or she will never become a real reader” (p. 95). She emphasizes, however, that reading is not a simple entry into other worlds, on the contrary – it means leaving the given reality of the here and now: “Among all species, only man has acquired this mysterious ability to read, and thus to leave the reality given to him – mentally, and for some time. Each time we open a book, a kind of miracle happens between the eye and the surface of the paper, something extraordinary” (p. 94).

Tokarczuk treats reading as a part of human skills, the next stage in language development; she combines reading with the written word, and the process itself she illustrates literally and figuratively at the same time – reading is a simple combination of letters to form words, but it then

leads to reading reality; entering and leaving a mentally given reality. This simple activity is perceived with all senses: “We see rows of letters, and when we peruse them with our eyes, our brain transforms them into images, thoughts, smells, and voices. It is not only that information is read from simple signs, because a computer could also do that. Rather, it is a matter of the sights, smells and sounds that flow from these signs” (p. 94).

A FINGER DIPPED IN SALT... READING AS A WEB OF DICHOTOMIES

Reading, as one might assume, considering the title of the analyzed text, has been portrayed predominantly from the perspective of the author’s personal experiences. And yet, in the text, one may find dichotomies, aspects of which on some levels must only be discovered, as their intermingling disturbs a clean-cut assignation to one range only. This testifies to a comprehensive approach to the problem. Dichotomies constitute a significant compositional element of the essay, serving as its axis on multiple levels.

How can these dichotomies be captured?

Reading as an interweaving of dichotomies:

1. primary dichotomy: reading as a skill and a process in a person’s development vs. reading as a process in the author’s life
2. secondary dichotomies:
 - 2.1. type of text criterion: reading functional texts vs. reading literature
 - 2.2. competence criterion: naïve vs. mature reader
 - 2.3. age criterion: youth vs. old age
 - 2.4. gender criterion: female vs. male

The first dichotomy, which can be described as primary, because it is constitutive of the entire essay, as will be discussed later on in this article, concerns reading on the thematic level, problematizing this process. It has been presented successively as a process in human development at various stages in his or her life and compared with the process in the life of the author herself. In both cases, the chronological order clearly determines both ranges, which has been articulated clearly already in the phrase: *a history of my reading*. This dichotomy apparently forms the main axis of this text. And yet, considering the title of the essay and the proportion of space devoted to the two thematic ranges, it is the latter one that should undoubtedly be considered the dominant one. This dichotomy makes visible the preference for diversified use of linguistic elements, thus creating two areas, largely overlapping with the members of the primary dichotomy: the area constituted by reference to, among others, popular elements of developmental psychology in relation to reading which requires specific specialist vocabulary, and the area of the author’s personal reading experience that gives the reader an insight into the language of her idiolect. As will be discussed in section *The author’s means of expression – linguistic and stylistic aspect* some parts of the text contain also colloquial expressions.

It needs to be noted, however, that even though Tokarczuk refers to psychological aspects of reading, she at the same time speaks of the miracle of reading which testifies to it having a metaphysical character for her. Even though this process is a study material for psychologists, the fact it is a miracle makes it elude scientific scrutiny: “I don’t think any psychologist has ever explained this miracle of reading” (p. 94).

Tokarczuk clearly separates the activity of reading from reading literature, calling reading informational texts a cult of facts, and at the same time linking reading literature with images and

dialogues (p. 96). This exploration of fictional worlds is more important for the reader because it allows him or her to develop, create, feel and sense, and to live the lives of others: “Because when we ask this question, that means we have lost **the ability to play worlds**, to balance on the border of what is and what could be, what has not happened yet and what does not exist; we are losing an extremely important and creative, mercury-like, vibrant and alive mercurial part of our psyche – this element which, being a deeply human ability, allows us to **create alternative worlds and live the lives of other people**” (p. 97). This thought is also present on other pages of the essay:

“The novel should create a world which we can enter (...)” (p.100)

“When reading, we are participating in the life of someone else and become him or her” (p. 100)

“You read to – it is a deeper, more valuable kind of understanding” (p. 104)

It should be added, that we read in order to acquire information, (to learn) or to feel. We perceive facts differently, stories and novels. This is also justified when we take into account the style variations of contemporary language. Media texts (informative and journalistic) are placed within broadly understood journalism. Regardless of the changing styles of writing and creating new (today multimodal) genres, media texts are used to disseminate information and opinions (Żydek-Bednarczuk, 2013, p. 179). Literary texts play a different role in the communication space because, the artistic style is characterized by focusing attention on the word and its aesthetics, “and the effect of the poetic use of words is still their spontaneous experiencing” (Jasionowicz, 1995, p. 101).

As has already been mentioned, these are not the only dichotomies present in the text. In a fragment of the first part of the primary dichotomy, a partial dichotomy can be distinguished which is implicit in its nature, because when it comes to reading, what is meant is reading belles-lettres. This is because the author cares about fiction the most, and her considerations about reading concern predominantly novels. Other genres are not examined even if their existence cannot be ignored. Olga Tokarczuk’s literary preferences are thus a pivotal factor.

Subsequent partial dichotomies in the discussed segment refer to age: youth, the initiation time for reading vs. old age: the receptivity towards the presented world which is high in youth is contrasted with the weakened receptivity in old age. Tokarczuk develops this partial dichotomy supplementing it with an additional factor – gender. Girls read more and then, “as elderly ladies, they retain the love for the written word” (p. 96), which the author presents as an undisputable fact.

The bifurcation of this dichotomy, based on the age criterion, and regarding the choice of genres to which the readers devote their attention, is visible in the next paragraph. Thus, novels remain the subject of interest of younger people, while biographies and non-fiction monographs appeal to older people: “With age, there usually come some kind of autism: we are no longer interested in novels (...), we think that we can find more interesting things in biographies and monographs (...)” (p. 96).

This strong, surprising even, metaphor of autism, transferred from the field of psychology, is the starting point for the emergence of another dichotomy which is extremely important for the ontology of literary works. It is based on the opposition between *truth and falsehood*. For Tokarczuk, the question about the truth of the events described in the novel is tantamount to the end of literature: “Because when we ask this question, that means we have lost the ability to play worlds, to balance on the border of what is and what could be, what has not happened yet and what does not exist; we are losing an extremely important and creative, mercury-like, vibrant and alive mercurial part of our psyche – this element which, being a deeply human ability, allows us to create

alternative worlds and live the lives of other people. It also allows us to create the future, to test it, and in the most perfect way it communicates us with others, teaches empathy and shows how alike we are and different at the same time. Readers of novels are, in a way, ‘bigger’, they have a broader awareness, because they have lived the lives of other people, even if for only a moment” (p. 97). This extensive passage is the culmination of considerations presented in the form of various dichotomies and, at the same time, a praise of literature.

However, if we were to define the first type of reading mentioned in the primary dichotomy, in an abbreviated fashion, as a skill and process in human development, this simplification would not bring out the *miracle of reading*. This miracle is rooted in the dichotomy which depends on the physicality of graphic signs (which can be assimilated after one has mastered the language) and the mystery hiding beneath them – of the reader’s participation in various worlds that open up to him or her thanks to reading, activate the imagination and stimulate the senses “Every time we open a book, a miracle, something extraordinary happens between the eye and the surface of the paper. We see rows of letters, and when our eyes move over them, our brain transforms them into images, thoughts, smells, and voices. It is not just that specific information is read from simple signs, because a computer could also do that. It is rather a matter of sights, smells, and sounds that emerge from these signs” (p. 94).

Thus defined ability to read which distinguishes the human species, has been described by Tokarczuk as a common miracle, with the following justification “because it happens every second in different places all over the world (...)” (p. 94). Implicitly present here is the second part of the dichotomy, involving other beings for whom reading is not available.

When we look at the second part of the primary dichotomy, it must be concluded that, also in its fragments, the chronology of the reader’s development, in this case the author’s, is important, even constitutive, due to the selection of readings, varied at different stages of life as the reader keeps maturing to new ones. What is general and characteristic of humans as a species, and for humans only, can be found in this dichotomy through personal experiences of the Nobel Prize winner herself. Often the writer's own observations, the presentation of various situations in which the acts of reading took place, the personal choice of reading dictated by age and the evolution of the way of presenting it, are always shown with great subjectivism related to the stage of development, age and interests.

THE AUTHOR’S MEANS OF EXPRESSION – LINGUISTIC AND STYLISTIC ASPECT

As a mature person, the writer adjusts the vocabulary to the presented content by reporting the evolutionary acts of her own reading. Thus, in the dichotomous approach, there can be found both specialist terminology and colloquial lexis, as well as idiolectal traces of linguistic creativity. When analyzing the language of the essay in its various dimensions, it is worth paying attention to the most salient examples. In the first part of the primary dichotomy (a fragment of the text about reading as a process in human life), specialist terms often appear, predominantly in the field of psychology, e.g.:

“mercury-like, the vibrant and alive **mercurial** part of our psyche” (p. 97);

“For fear of **persecution**” (p. 110)

“I consisted mainly of all possible **idiosyncrasies**” (p. 111)

“Strengthened my **adolescent solipsistic anxieties**” (p. 110-111)

“I grew up in **neurotic self-analysis**” (p. 112)

“**Synchronicities** begin to work” (p. 113)

Hermes as “The Great Alchemist is in charge of **transmutation**” (p. 99)

In addition to the above-mentioned terminology, the author uses general expressions that add a scientific or erudite character to the argumentation, which creates a polyphonic text, as illustrated by selected examples of expressions that permeate the text:

“**Acquiring language skills** is a complicated process that is subject to ‘**neural initiation**’ (...)”
(p. 95)

“So far, psychologists have established that the ability to read effectively is one of the signs of **mental health**. Fruitful reading is one connected with understanding and experiencing what is read. We do not read in moments of agitation or **stress**. People suffering from **psychosis** lose this ability almost completely. Reading is therefore the privilege of a **heathy, balanced mind**” (p. 94-95)

“(…) salt helps to more efficiently transfer impulses at **synapses**, so that our **nervous system**, our **perception** and **thinking** work better and faster.” (p. 107)

“Contrary to what the old myth tells, literature is not a matter of muses, those diligent patrons and stewards of sciences and arts. It was Hermes who invented literature, as he did many other things”
(p. 97) – erudite style.

However, vocabulary relating to the psychological sphere, which is an important distinguishing feature of specialized communication, and a sign of knowledge accumulated and developed in the learning process (Berdychowska, 2010, p. 62-63), does not constitute in the analyzed essay a specialized text which assumes the symmetry of communication. The choice of terms results not only from the writer's experience, but also from her knowledge of the processes taking place in the human mind, thanks to which she appears as an expert on the human soul, and in the essay, she serves also as a conduit of knowledge about thinking and imagination. At the level of the text, this process runs smoothly because Tokarczuk actualizes two writing styles: of a specialist-psychologist and of an emotional reader. Speaking of reading, she introduces a clear asymmetry – on the one hand, there is the view of a psychologist, aware of the complexity of the issue, and on the other hand – she presents it in a colloquial, expressive way.

Emotional outlook dominates the passages concerning the author's reading history, especially from childhood and adolescence. These passages showcase language that illustrates her individualism, consisting in the use of unusual terms and collocations and the use of both colloquial expressions (colloquiality should be understood broadly as an anthropological-cultural and linguistic-stylistic category, because the text uses words from a marked register, but their function is to show the problem from the point of view of the colloquial style as the style center of contemporary Polish – see Bartmiński 2001, p. 116-117) and creative metaphorical images taken from everyday life. The accumulation of such diverse means of expression gives the text a “mosaic” character.

Some metaphors are downright surprising by combining abstract concepts with the names of specific objects or activities. As cognitive scientists often emphasize, the metaphor becomes the domain of everyday life, and it is not in sophisticated, but in simple constructions that we perceive the image of reality. Metaphors support reception in the recipient – they serve for the audience as “cognitive glasses” (Ger. Erkenntnisbrillen – see. <https://sprachkompass.ch/theorie/metaphern-erkennen>). Cognitive scientists pay attention to the use of metaphors not only in literary texts, but also in specialist texts and in everyday language, and they also emphasize that metaphors shape our thinking (see, for example, Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Blumenberg, 1999; Weinrich, 1972). This function of the metaphor manifests itself in the analyzed essay. *A finger dipped in salt ...* provides the reader with the following metaphorical images, among others:

“to pierce something with a **blunt and crude screwdriver of common sense**” (p. 106)
“Carefully **sorted** contents of our mind drawers” (p. 106)
“Going up **the winding stairs of ambiguous images**” (p. 111)
“I had the feeling that I was participating in an intellectually fundamental event that would **format my mind forever**” (the first reading of *The Magic Mountain*) (p. 102)
“I must add that I also consider Freud a novelist, especially when he so meticulously **peels his patients, layer from layer**, in the process of an in-depth analysis (...)” (p. 111).
The writer's idiolect is characterized by a mixture of registers: scientific in the broad sense, colloquial, emotionally marked, and neutral and metaphorically marked. As a result of such diversity, certain combinations of stylistically inconsistent collocations, the use of which can be described as the poet's licentia of the writer, e.g. “I was maturing to a **neurotic self-analysis**” (p. 112), add freshness to the essay and create a unique mosaic by combining terms that constitute an unusual whole.

Colloquial lexemes are used to convince the reader that literature is not an elite art but accompanies us every day. The writer argues with some *academics* who classify literature as high art, writing that “it should be not elitist, but everyday and universal art, rubbing against stations and hotels, and stalls.” (p. 100)

The register of stylistic means used to evoke colloquiality is rich, composed of both emotionally marked lexemes, which are juxtaposed in an asymmetric collocation with the context:

“(…) how is literature **messing** with us” (p. 93) – a surprising combination of a colloquial verb *do* and the noun *literature*
“**I went crazy** reading Lem (...)” (p. 109) – an unusual combination of two parts, a colloquial verb with a participle denoting the activity of reading Lem's works, (i.e. the use of metonymy), colloquial evaluation of people and objects
Freud “couldn't care less about the beauty of the language or the rhythm of the sentence” (p. 111) – (a very colloquial way of assessing the expression of Freud's attitude towards attributes of language)
“Well, Lem **has loosened my screws**”(p. 109) – a modified phraseology
“**Here I put down my spiritual roots** (...) and even much later, while taking literary journeys down the further shelves of the "Library", I finally found other continents (...)” (p. 108)

When actualizing her reading experience, Tokarczuk combines two styles of expression. On the one hand, she is a reader aware of her feelings, which is expressed in the use of scientific and specialized lexis, e.g. *creating alternative worlds, the creative, mercurial part of the psyche, the object of affect*; on the other, she shows herself in her childhood and youth as a naive, emotional reader who *voraciously devours novels* (p. 106), and **whose hooked on the print eyes are rambling** (p. 108).

When analyzing colloquial style measures, it should be emphasized that Tokarczuk transfers the feelings and emotions linked with reading and imagination to specific objects (*screwdriver, drawer, staircase*), applies them to ordinary, emotional, spontaneous feelings of a human being, e.g. *rummaging through a book collection, loosen screws, go crazy, not care about something*, and introduces colloquial expressions referring to old or new reality, e.g. *buy books from under the counter* (the colloquial expression: *from under the counter* was used in the Times of the Polish People's Republic, when certain goods, including books (especially by famous authors, or popular) were difficult to obtain and could only be purchased clandestinely (cf. colloquial sold or bought illegally because of the impossibility of official purchase due to supply shortages: <https://wsjp.pl/haslo/podglad/42150/spod-lady>), *format someone's mind*. The recalled everyday life becomes a value that serves to reflect on the reading and the feelings of the

reader, which Bożena Witosz (2007) also notes in relation to literary texts, writing: “Everyday life, ordinariness can also be a source of aesthetic contemplation” (p. 14). The writer coherently combines the language of science with common-sense cognition, while colloquial terms - when she talks about her experiences – build a sense of closeness and privacy, thanks to which it is possible to meet two subjects: the writer and the reader. Is it therefore reasonable to ask whether this dichotomy is a certain strategy undertaken in order to gain attention, convince people to her own way of thinking, delight with literature and persuade them to return to the same readings? Or perhaps the goal is to create a tender reader?

DISCUSSION

A careful reading of *A finger dipped in salt ...* provides the researcher with an interesting field for analytical observations, both in terms of theme and composition, as well as linguistic material. It is worth noting that, with regard to the composition of the text as a whole, the topological factor is important. The elements of the primary dichotomy reading as a process and *the author's reading history* do not follow each other directly: the delimitating elements are accents of a literary character. Interestingly, in the passage that opens the essay, as a kind of introduction to the subject of the first part of the dichotomy, Tokarczuk makes a list of literary works and draws attention to the role of literature in the process of shaping an active reader: “Literature, creating worlds of an amazing ontological status, takes us beyond ourselves and allows us to participate in an experience, which otherwise would not be given to us.” (p. 93) On the other hand, before the passage constituting the second part, concerning reading as a process in the writer's life, there is a fragment of the text which separates both these parts:

“Let's also look at the special children of Hermes: Pan and the Hermaphrodite. They bring to mind other domains of Hermes, invariably connected with literature: its rootedness in the oldest mythology, in that human Primeval, when the first fears, still partly animal, and the first human dreams were turned into stories (...)” (p. 99).

Here, the author emphasizes the numerous forms of Hermes's activity and its connection with literature, thus drawing a certain analogy between Hermes's "utilitarian" fields of activity and the character of literature, which, according to her, “should not be an elite, but everyday and universal art, rubbing against railway stations, hotels, and stalls” (p. 100). Just as Hermes dealt with many domains close to life, so literature should enter the life of every reader, including those who are not prepared to read literature that requires interpretation. When Tokarczuk writes about reading, she refers to her own experiences, not only scientific ones, stating: “(...) I am first of all a reader, then a writer” (p. 94).

The author portrays the process of becoming a mature reader, leading to “building a very individualized, self-aware personality of contemporary man” (p. 101). In Tokarczuk's essay, we find very clearly formulated thoughts that emphasize only positive sides of reading literature, as they appear in topologically different places in the text.

Karina Jarzyńska (2020, p. 507) describes Tokarczuk's attitude as an apology for reading. Although the essay discussed by Tokarczuk is dominated by the praise of reading, when we look at the contemporary world, it is not difficult to notice that reading belles-lettres is not a very popular activity at present. It can therefore be said that the praise of reading results, on the one hand, from the personal experiences of the writer, for whom reading is a form of life, and on the other hand, from the attitude towards readers whom she wants to 'infect' with reading, contrary to the prevailing trends.

An important result of the analysis is the identification of a web of dichotomies both on the level of the presented content and of the use of language. These, however, cannot be presented schematically due to the complex and non-uniform structure of the text on both planes. Therefore, it is more legitimate to speak of a dichotomy weave or a polyphonic structure of a text in which the author's voice is heard as a writer and a psychologist. Tokarczuk combines this attitude with her experiences as a reader (from childhood to adulthood).

CONCLUSION

The analysis shows that the mosaic character of the text manifests at its various levels. The author speaks about reading in scientific, popular and erudite language, with idiolectal elements and those belonging to the emotional register of everyday language. The reader thus appears as a complex, evolving category, very sensitive, perceptive, and at the same time capable of organizing, thinking, evaluating, and interpreting. The distinction of unusual, even surprising collocation combinations and metaphors is an expression of the writer's creativity.

The use of various stylistic measures is related to the author's perspective who, in a way, *from a bird's eye point of view* first makes a specific (mainly psychological) overview of the knowledge of the reading process, and then shows, again from a certain perspective, the development of this process in her own life as a reader. The use of originally juxtaposed style measures results, among others, from her emotional relationship with books in childhood and adolescence, presented in the essay from the point of view of a mature reader and author of many works, for whom literature is of the utmost importance.

For a reader who knows Olga Tokarczuk's Nobel lecture entitled *A tender narrator*, there is a parallel which is worth mentioning at this point. In the aforementioned lecture, the writer characterizes a tender narrator who sees and knows more than other characters in literature, thus presenting the apology of a narrator sensitive to the problems of literature, the world and man (cf. Bilut-Homplewicz and Krauz, 2022), while in the analyzed text we find apology of reading. In essay *A finger dipped in salt, or a short history of my reading (Palec w soli, czyli Krótka historia mojego czytania)* she builds a bridge between what is general and what is personal, with an intention to educate a tender reader. This can be understood as the meaning of the analyzed essay, which ends with the general existential message "Yes, we are here to read" (p. 113) (Translation of all fragments of the analysed essay by Patrycja Austin).

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