



## LAUDATIO FOR OLGA TOKARCZUK

BY JACEK DEHNEL, JURY MEMBER

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Olga,

The least successful eulogies are the ones where the speaker talks about himself, and not about the person who is actually receiving the award; I'm afraid we've all heard that sort of a eulogy at least once in our lives. But please allow me to make one small personal comment. Now that I've reached the end of my three-year term as a member of the jury for the Jan Michalski Prize, it is my great joy and honour to be able to share with you my admiration for the work of an author whom I regard as the greatest writer working in my native language today.

Nor am I alone in my admiration. At last the whole world is starting to appreciate the greatness of Olga Tokarczuk's writing. Just a few months ago she won the Man Booker International award for her novel *Flights*, and the film adaptation of another novel recently published in English translation, *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, won a Silver Bear at the Berlin Film Festival for its director, Agnieszka Holland. More and more translations are appearing and are making the best-seller lists in their own countries, as well as winning prizes – in Great Britain and Sweden, and now here in Montricher.

But my joy derives from something else as well: from our jury's contribution to an important process. I think it's worth mentioning that process while presenting an award to *The Books of Jacob*, whose main protagonist comes from the ill-defined, marshy frontiers of Europe, from lands that are regarded with indifference, if not superiority, like most things that are poorly known or entirely unfamiliar. This summer, when Antonia Lloyd-Jones, translator of several of Olga Tokarczuk's books among others, received the Transatlantyk award, Stanley Bill, the head of Polish studies at Cambridge University, said in his eulogy: "*We know that the world of literature is not fair, and there's no equality within it..., literature thrives mainly on translations from certain languages in particular, certain hegemonic cultures... such as French, German, Russian and American, rather than translations of literature that, to be frank, is semi-marginal. ... In this context the work of this great translator of Polish literature into English, in other words a translator of semi-marginal literature... into a language of the so-called centre, has a dimension that is not just political but also ethical. It is the work of someone who wants the invisible to become visible, in the deep conviction that the invisible is necessary, not just because it is valuable in itself, but also because it*

*has something essential to say.*" This award too, this fabulous library, and the entire Jan Michalski Foundation, from the very start of its existence have all been committed to building bridges between the safe and affluent heart of Europe and the unsafe, unfamiliar margins, the literatures of the "lesser gods".

And so I am immensely pleased that this year's Jan Michalski Prize is being awarded to a work whose full title is: "*The Books of Jacob, or: a fantastic journey over seven borders, five languages and three major religions, not counting minor sects, told by the dead, supplemented by the Author with CONJECTURAL EMENDATION drawn from a range of Books as well as aided by imagination, the which the greatest natural gift of any Person*", because crossing borders seems especially pertinent today.

Drawing on tales about the eighteenth-century mystic and religious reformer Jacob Frank, who dodged his way between the wealthy and the needy of this world, Olga Tokarczuk has created not just a monumental, almost thousand-page historical epic that reconstructs events long past and forgotten, but also a universal, topical story.

Universal, because here she has summoned into being a whole crowd of extremely vivid, memorable characters, who eagerly recount their own minor fortunes and thus contribute to the entire wealth of the novel. So here we have: an enigmatic prophet; his wife and his daughter; the faithful chronicler of the sect; an old woman who is determined to live forever by means of cabbalistic magic; a bishop who lives and breathes politics; a born troublemaker who has crowned himself king of the Greek islands; his cousin – a *grande dame* with some rather unusual habits; her loyal lady-in-waiting who is also a poet; a provincial priest who is in love with the lady-in-waiting and who is writing his own encyclopaedia; and finally a wide range of members of the sect: men, women and children, old and young, beautiful and ugly, stubborn and submissive. Whenever she presents historical characters, Olga Tokarczuk reveals the unknown side of them that's been kept hidden from the world, and whenever she goes beyond the facts registered by historians, she gives a voice to the people who didn't have one: the maltreated, those who disappeared without trace, huddled in the margins of recorded history. This is life set within those times and places, and yet, thanks to the mastery of Olga Tokarczuk, it tells us a lot about other times and places too.

But what makes this story topical? Just like the protagonists of *The Books of Jacob*, we are living in an era of change. The old order, which seemed so firmly fixed, is shaking in its foundations, changing its skin at a faster rate than ever before in history as we know it. Jacob Frank was born in 1726, when life in the



eastern borderlands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was the same as a hundred, maybe two or three hundred years earlier: in the countryside the peasants sowed and reaped their crops, and the Jews traded at the village fairs, while the gentry attended parliamentary sessions in the capital, hunted in the forests or went out to war; from time to time armies marched across the plains, killing, raping, pillaging and taking captives into slavery, while famine and pestilence followed in their wake. When he died in 1791, the *Encyclopédie* was forty years old, the steam engine almost thirty, and the United States fifteen; in France and Poland the Enlightenment constitutions were being praised, and the ashes of Voltaire were being laid to rest in the Panthéon. Amid the pains of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, the nineteenth century was on the point of being born, just as mysterious, unexpected and incomprehensible for the people of the time as the twenty-first century was for us in 1991, when communism and the Soviet Union collapsed, and nobody had yet heard of the Internet.

When a snake changes its skin, its shape remains unaltered – but that same shape must now be embraced by new tissues. Similarly, at these moments in history, the shape of the world is enveloped by new ideas, terms and visions; alongside Napoleon, Goethe, Monsieur Guillotin and others, Jacob Frank was one of those who were to sew a new skin for the world and help it to remove the old one. But let's not be deceived – the extraordinary tale of this charismatic man and of the people who were drawn to him is just one link in a chain of similar events, a repetition of ancient ideas that would be repeated again in the generations that followed – in our era too.

As we all know, no good deed goes unpunished. So it was in this case too. Olga Tokarczuk's detailed analysis of a forgotten episode in Polish – and more generally eastern European – history, and also the interviews she gave when the book was first published, in which she talked about several issues that, though fairly obvious, strike against the monolith of national mythology, led to the flare-up of a hate campaign. It involved not just common citizens hurling abuse and threatening violence and death, but also some more prominent people: journalists and politicians, including a senator from the ruling party, who demanded that the writer be stripped of her honorary citizenship of the town of Nowa Ruda. Olga Tokarczuk ended up on an informal list of authors who shouldn't be promoted abroad, and the Polish Minister of Culture said in an interview that she was one those authors who are read by young filmmakers, but whom they shouldn't read, because "they won't get far".



But *The Books of Jacob* is not in the least, as one might expect from the reactions of these politicians, a simple, “worthy” tale, serving the role of publicity, something that can be harnessed to some sort of political scheme or purpose. Quite the opposite. The novel’s protagonists, starting with Jacob Frank himself, become embroiled in some ambivalent situations and conflicts. The prophet who propagates liberation from oppression, the emancipation of women and free love, also becomes a source of sexual slavery and a cruel despot. The provincial priest, composing his anachronistic, absurd encyclopaedia, in which the entry for “Horse” goes: “The horse is as everyone sees it”, proves to be the tenderest writer of love letters, and his bashful, modest affection is one of the most moving features of the novel. By twisting this quote, one could say that in *The Books of Jacob* no one is as everyone sees them. Nor is history either.

Today, in this age of simplifications, fake news and blatant propaganda, the subtlety and psychological insight with which Olga Tokarczuk portrays her individual characters, societies and even entire nations and epochs, is an exercise in understanding. In understanding the other – because they’re alien, the other – because they’re in the past, the other – because they think differently. In writing *The Books of Jacob*, the winner of this year’s Jan Michalski Prize has referred to mystical, cabbalistic traditions as well as to historical works to create and people a complete, independent world that remains with us long after we’ve finished reading the book. But I think it will stay with its readers in another sense too. As Italo Calvino put it, “A classic is a book that has never finished saying what it has to say”, and considering its extraordinary richness, *The Books of Jacob* has almost infinite potential for further re-reading and creative exploration, thanks to which I’m sure that, generation after generation, we shall keep returning to it, and finding the answers in it to questions that we are not yet capable of asking today.

Jacek Dehnel