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Holland as a space of knowledge and cognitive receptivity: The image of the Netherlands in Olga Tokarczuk's *Flights* from the perspective of looking

Abstract

Olga Tokarczuk's writings are preoccupied with the entropy-ridden world. Tokarczuk renders this world in polyphonic images, and her protagonists seek to establish their identities by redefining their relation to it. In *Flights*, a prominent place on this world's map is ascribed to Holland, whose image, when studied through the lens of imagology, turns out to be a space of knowledge and cognitive receptivity. Organised within the framework of selective attention, the representation of Holland is focused on perception of the narrator and of the protagonists, which conveys the attitude to the world identified with the text. Examination of the literary vision of the Netherlands and Dutch culture reveals Tokarczuk's strategy of foregrounding selected enclosed spaces (interiors) which serve as the loci of knowledge (Verheyen's study, De Waag and Ruysch's home). Such a portrayal of Holland is underpinned by self-images exemplified in ideas developed by philosophers linked to this country (Descartes and Spinoza) and in art, with which the writer engages in dialogue. Explored in imagological terms, the representation of the Netherlands is a non-stereotypical vision constructed through references to an array of cultural expressions produced by the Dutch, in which the past co-generates a palimpsestic picture of the present.

Keywords: image of the Netherlands, Tokarczuk, imagology, space of knowledge, cognitive receptivity.

By critical consensus, Olga Tokarczuk is an author whose writing is preoccupied with the entropy of the world (Zapędowska 1996: 93; Franaszek 2007: 14; Larek 2008: 200; Pawłowski 2008: 22; Szpakowska 2008; Barbaruk 2018: 80–81; Szkaradnik 2018: 105). In her novels, chaos, which has lurked in the world since its dawn, is at its most pronounced in the narratives whose plots revolve around the journey motif. It is in constant movement and indelible dispersal that

Tokarczuk looks for meaning, while she treats harmony as a complement to them (Czapliński 1999). Building on such a vision of the order of the world, she creates intrinsically polyphonic images of reality – both of the past and of today – and usually casts her protagonists as individuals who seek to define their identities. The ancient human need for identity is as a rule concurrent with another, equally long-standing one – the desire for knowledge that transcends the Self and helps establish the Self’s relation to the world. The individual’s epistemological struggles follow various courses, and their outcomes can take multiple forms, ranging from self-awareness to scientific discoveries. In Tokarczuk’s book *Flights*, the title itself ushers in the idea of movement as salvific and salutary, which, if anything, is even more emphatically conveyed by the book’s original title *Bieguni*, an allusion to a religious sect which believed that evil and the devilish workings of the Antichrist could only be evaded in and through mobility.¹ “He who rules the world has no power over movement” (Tokarczuk 2017: 266), writes Tokarczuk as she leads the reader on across various regions of Europe, Asia and America. The metaphor of life as a pilgrimage expresses the epistemological position of the subject whose aim is always “some other pilgrim” (Tokarczuk 2017: 25) and the world.

1. The image of the Netherlands from an imagological perspective

In *Flights*, a very special place is accorded to Holland, which may not be the greatest of expanses in the literary universe, but its area, though small relative to the other lands which are evoked, proves to be the *spatium* of knowledge and cognitive receptivity. The ways of constructing this literary representation of the country, its culture and the people who produce it will be explored from the perspective of imagology, a comparatist framework² which has evolved from national language and literature studies³ and is dedicated to the study of the images of the Other. The ideas which inform images – conceived as “[t]he mental or discursive representation or reputation of a person, group, ethnicity or a ‘nation’” (Leerssen 2007c: 342) – can be fathomed by examining their instantiations in literary works. A literary text with the journey motif (which always

¹ *Bieguni* is the Polish equivalent of the Russian *beguni*, i.e. “runners” or “wanderers,” the name of this 19th-century Russian religious sect.

² Cf. Lidia Wiśniewska (2002).

³ Manfred Beller (2007: 4–5) cites Madame de Staël’s introduction to *De l’Allemagne* and Goethe’s *Italienische Reise* as exemplifying the formation of images of the Other and “selective perceptions.”

promotes encounters with the Other⁴) as its important compositional device, Tokarczuk's *Flights* presents an image of Holland arising from representations of its inhabitants and its culture. They are rooted in self-images, i.e. representations perpetuated by the Dutch in art⁵ and recorded in history,⁶ that is, in the realms of culture, where semiotically varying communications (such as graphic, optical, perceptual and mental images)⁷ form a network of meanings, which co-produce and disseminate visions of the Other and of the Self-Same (Leerssen 2007b: 29). Self-images in *Flights* constitute the trope of Netherlandic culture, and investigating them helps study "selective attention" (Beller 2007: 7) which crucially involves a reduction of characteristics⁸ and is a testament to the axiology espoused by the writer's culture and to her own sensibility.⁹

Below, the analysis of the literary image of Holland in Tokarczuk's book will focus on the ways in which space is constructed, as the representations of *spatium* combine the nature-determined characteristics of a given area and its human-produced cultural properties, with the latter constituting our major concern in this argument.

Tokarczuk first mentions Holland in terms of its contemporary status (Tokarczuk 2017: 186–187), but most of her attention is devoted to the country's past, which has so powerfully made its mark on Europe's knowledge and culture. In *Flights*, the Kingdom of the Netherlands is a place where the writer's dream of "watching without being seen" comes true (Tokarczuk 2017: 186): "Holland where people, convinced of their utter innocence, do not use curtains. After dusk the windows turn into little stages [...] Dutch paintings. Moving lives" (Tokarczuk 2017: 186). Extraordinary to many Europeans, the glimpses of everyday life (Rybczyński 1987: 57–58) inspire Tokarczuk to ponder things that go far beyond simple insights into daily customs. The fragmentation of life into "lines, planes and bodies, and their transformations in time" (Tokarczuk 2017: 188) inclines her to reflect on the detail and on looking,¹⁰ which have always been

⁴ Beller emphasises that images of other countries, cultures and societies are conveyed not only in literary representations but also in travel writings, plays, poetry and essays (Beller 2007: 5, 7).

⁵ Daniel-Henri Pageaux (2019: 136) stresses that the idea of otherness, which is fundamental to comparative studies, calls for studies which examine mental structures and cultural configurations, therein cultural models and value systems established within a given historical period.

⁶ Joep Leerssen (2007b: 28) insists that the historical context must be taken into account in imagologist research.

⁷ In this enumeration, Beller draws on Mitchell (cf. Beller 2007: 3–4; Mitchell 1986).

⁸ Beller stresses that "[l]iterary texts also reduce the complex of various characteristics of an individual to a small number of noteworthy, salient aspects and characteristics" (2007: 7).

⁹ Jean-Marie Moura (1998: 43) argues that "image créée par la sensibilité particulière d'un auteur."

¹⁰ I understand looking to be a sensory epistemological activity.

crucial to Hollanders. The book, whose discontinuous,¹¹ mosaic- or constellation-like (Bratkowski 2018: 115) structure generically intermingles the discursive and the fictional (Nowacki 2007: 20), while being amalgamated by a fascinating with movement is interspersed with, or rather woven from, passages devoted to looking, which is always vital to knowledge-thirsty scholars and wanderers as well as to sensation-craving artists. Tokarczuk insistently reiterates that “seeing is knowing” and develops on this notion in an episode featuring an extensive description of anatomical specimens (Tokarczuk 2017: 25–28), without failing to indicate her interest in the other human being. Looking as an epistemological activity absorbs her in and of itself. Her observation that “there are people who see the small things, and those who see only big things” (Tokarczuk 2017: 197) in fact suggests the endorsement of the former, which is axial to oculo-centric culture and important to Dutch culture. The capacity for apprehending the detail influenced the art of the Netherlands. Without this dedication to seeing small things, science would not have developed. Last, but not least, Tokarczuk considers it an indication of an eagerness to fathom the entropy-ridden world. In *Flights*, the episodes in which the protagonists look always convey curiosity and openness to the other and the mysterious, because the world is a text which requires interpretation. Behind and underneath the visible, there is a layer of hidden meanings, knowledge and surprise, the discovery of which allays human existential anxiety and fosters the development of humankind.

2. Holland: The perspective of looking

Although in *Flights* Tokarczuk cursorily glides over the landscapes of Holland and only briefly mentions its art, Dutch artworks – in particular paintings – seep through in the image of the Low Countries she produces. She admits herself that “while writing I had before me some weird, bizarre maps which I had found somewhere in Holland” (Pawłowski 2008: 23), but it was not the physical space of the country that trickled into the book. Reading maps as visual, systematic and symbolic representations of *spatium* (Wintle 2007: 273) leads to textualising space (Rewers 1996: 35). In her book, Tokarczuk does not entirely eschew describing Holland, but she is considerably restrained when conjuring up its topographies. She sketches landscapes of Leiden’s countryside and outlines the centre of Amsterdam and the quayside with moored ships in vignettes suffused with local colour, but does not dwell on them long enough to let these images eclipse the ruminations on the events unfolding in these spaces. She is far more engrossed in spaces linked to looking and knowledge, such as De Waag in Amsterdam, where public

¹¹ A fragmentary novelistic structure is regarded by Hikaru Ogura (2019: 13–14) as characteristic of Central-European literature.

autopsies are performed in the famous *theatrum anatomicum*. Thus Tokarczuk's book includes two varieties of looking-inflected images of Holland. One of them is made up of the narrator-evoked topographies while the other type of images of scholarly looking in which disinterest in the aesthetic beauties of the country is combined with the focus on the expressions of its citizens' attitude to knowledge.

2.1. The image of the Netherlands

Depictions of the Netherlands which make up the narrator's topographies belong to the category of sketchy, axiologically-laden descriptions. As she did in her previous novels, Tokarczuk settles for the descriptive strategy developed by Scott, whereby she considerably condenses the particulars that she renders. She only chooses some of the distinctive Dutch landscapes and, more frequently, interiors. These descriptions are focussed around objects of scrutiny, which determines the descriptive order and systematises the cognitive process (Sławiński 2000: 229), here specifically the narrator's examination of events from three hundred years ago. Against the most common custom, Tokarczuk¹² uses the perspective of looking without hiding herself behind her characters (Hamon 2011: 149). In the description of the interior of Verheyen's house, the first depiction of Holland in the book as it were, she reveals herself and her gaze, directly addressing the reader: "And so I shall leave them – heading on a barge to Amsterdam" (Tokarczuk 2017: 195). The narrator's observant eyes guide the reader into Holland, first turning towards intimate spaces – an anatomist's closed study, the description of which brings to mind the Dutch tradition of making elaborate scale models of houses (Rybczyński 1987: 62), which revealed interiors and their inhabitants. This mode of presentation also builds on the conventions of old Dutch painting, whose masters, as Johann Huizinga observes, primarily attended to "intimate details of everyday life and the dreamy contemplation of far-away distances" (1968: 81). So, if Dutch painting often invites the viewer indoors, Tokarczuk employs descriptive strategies founded on the subject-focused, epistemological order, which Antoni Ziemia detects in Dutch artists, who involve the viewer in a game of illusions (2005: 14).

2.1.1. The narrator's perspective: Holland's landscape

Paradoxically, any discussion of the topography of Holland in *Flights* should begin with what is secondary for Tokarczuk, that is, with landscapes. The author selects only a handful of them and always makes them an accessory to the descriptions of interiors, which prove crucial to reflection on cognition and know-

¹² Tokarczuk tends to be identified with her narrators. See M. Orski (2008: 145).

ledge. The account of a journey to Leiden on which Verheyen and his student embark is a prelude to the trip to Amsterdam in order to take part in a public autopsy conducted by Ruysch; the episode also exemplifies selective attention, which Beller derives from cognitive psychology (Beller 2007: 7). The sketchy portrayal of the centre of the big city, which had already acquired a mythical status in those times (16th century, Oczko 2009: 65–92), turns out just to introduce the depiction of De Waag and the *theatrum anatomicum* it houses. Though brief and understated, the description of the scenery around Leiden includes components characteristic of this region which we know from paintings. A road, poplars growing in the vicinity, a cart of a vegetable hawker passing by, the Emperor's Inn – all of them, vaguely contoured as they are, bring to mind the landscapes painted by Meindert Hobbema, Pieter de Molyn, Jacob van Ruisdael or Jan von Goyen,¹³ picturing *buiten* (English: outside, outdoors) – the city's rural surroundings infused with a specifically Dutch flavour.¹⁴ The sketchy description with scant, if any, details primarily foregrounds the monotony of the lowland landscape, which is in fact irrelevant to further episodes and to the country as such. Amsterdam is presented in a similar fashion even though, by the standards of the time, it was a huge city which inspired admiration and awe. Nevertheless, this extraordinary location is allotted only a short passage when the plot returns to the protagonists travelling by barge. The mooring of the barge at the Herengracht is not described extensively even though it was among Amsterdam's most pivotal locations in the 16th century. Tokarczuk also leaves a narrow street in the Jewish quarter undescribed (unnamed even), devoting far more attention to the sensory experiences of the protagonists that are walking along it. Tokarczuk looks at the rising fog like a painter and registers lively inns, canals which do not smell in winter (Tokarczuk 2017: 204) and a harbour brimming with merchandise-loaded ships, which oozes a nose-irritating odour of the sea, fish and cinnamon. Amsterdam's waterfront is described as a busy, bustling place, with the most opulent descriptive detail reserved for the ships of the East India Company. Their depiction may be encapsulated in a single sentence, but it enumerates their properties, skilfully using animisation to convey both their appearance and their function: “The Company ships are bulky, with great bellies, squat, so they can fit as much as possible – silk, porcelain, carpets and spices; they could use huge mouths, too, the duckbills are so greedy” (Tokarczuk 2017: 227).¹⁵ This bud of

¹³ Interestingly, these painters have been highly valued by Polish writers, who have tended to refer to their works. See Magdalena Śniedziewska (2014: 31–102).

¹⁴ Such images are quite frequent in Dutch painting. Cf. Antoni Ziemia (2005: 340).

¹⁵ In the quotation, the clause following the semicolon is missing in Jennifer Croft's cited English translation of the book and was added here based on the first Polish edition of the book. See Tokarczuk (2007: 249).

a description (Sławiński 2000: 221) is reminiscent of marine paintings and prints, such as seascapes, representations of ships sailing off or drawing up and views of harbours, which enjoyed enormous popularity in Holland, as can be seen, for example, in the work of Heendrick Cornelisz Vroom (Ziembra 2005: 254–262). Tokarczuk’s descriptions of landscapes include views characteristic of Holland, but their selection and mode of presentation testify to the writer’s reference to the epistemological gaze of the painting’s spectator, which is however underpinned by her own axiology-derived looking. For, as a matter of fact, Tokarczuk picks such landscapes which render the distinctiveness of the place and simultaneously form a suitable background for the book’s focal concern, i.e. movement in the world and in human existence.

2.1.2. The narrator’s and the protagonist’s perspective: Interiors

In *Flights*, Holland is a space encompassed by sight which turns to interiors. The indoor locations play a more important role in it than vast or bounded landscapes. This perceptual activity results in the creation of enclosed spaces which, though not really plentiful in *Flights*, prove highly significant to the image of the Netherlands and of the country’s role in the cultural history of knowledge, which is relevant to the image of the present produced in the book. Tokarczuk weaves into her narrative a range of such *spatia* of varying sizes. The largest of them is the interior of De Waag, while the smallest are Verheyen’s laboratory and the chambers in Ruysch’s house. Common to them all are instrumental and meaningful ties to the science of anatomy. In contrast to the representations of vaster expanses, the visions of Dutch interiors in the book are more extensive, but they do not really abound in specific particulars.

2.1.2.1. *Theatrum anatomicum*

The building of De Waag is described not by the narrator, but by one of the protagonists – Willem van Horssen, whose tale about the great anatomist, the discoverer of the Achilles tendon, the founder of the “phantom pain” concept and the author of the *Corporis Humani Anatomia* (1693) is one of the threads in the heterogeneous structural texture of the opus. The looking of the protagonist as a descriptive strategy is, according to Philippe Hamon, a device that makes the reader perceive a given image as determined by “the *vision* of the character [...] his *ability to see*, and not [...] the *knowledge* of the novelist” (Hamon 2011: 149). The description of De Waag does not offer any details of its exterior (there is only a mention of the tower [Tokarczuk 2017: 204]), but the reader finds out far more about the interior of the building. Its description is incorporated into a tab-

leau¹⁶ which evokes associations with anatomy lessons painted by Dutch artists, that is, with cultural expressions which count as self-images (Leerssen 2007b: 29). The passages depicting the interior are arranged in the concentric order, proceeding from the edges (outside) to the midpoint (inside), which corresponds to the axiology of the events, the descriptions of cadavers and the activities of the *prælector anatomix*. After all, De Waag features in the book as a *locus* of knowledge – a space of anatomy spectacles which catered to curiosity and the drive for knowledge. Looking organises the description and is, as such, a blend of the intentions of the protagonists, whose role lies in triggering a particular response in the reader, and of the content order, which Ziemba defines as iconographic in relation to the realistic tradition in Dutch art and views as geared to making the viewer intrigued by the singularity of the subject-matter (Ziemba 2005: 15). This dual vision results in a literary representation of an anatomy lesson. The description of the amphitheatre-like room filled with benches, the anatomical exhibition and Ruysch's composition introduces the presentation of the most important site and event, that is, Ruysch's anatomy lesson which opens the winter season at the *theatrum anatomicum* (Tokarczuk 2017: 209–210). Tokarczuk gives an important role to the effects of the protagonist's gaze as they are to convey this extraordinary spectacle from the perspective of an attentive viewer, for whom it is not only a diversion, but primarily a cognitive experience. That is why Van Horsen's commentaries are accorded an equal significance as they interpret the scene in a way reminiscent of the ekphrasis of the Dutch anatomy lesson,¹⁷ whose rendering slightly departs from its conventional form in a twist that Tokarczuk gives it.¹⁸ Such paintings, collective portraits as they also are, have been shown not so much to express the artist's focal interest in the body or in the discovery of its mysteries, as rather to serve as a useful prop for portraying members of one or another guild of surgeons, who in fact not always look at the corpse while the autopsy itself is fictionalised and aestheticised (Hansen 1996: 663). As collective portraits which intertwine images with narratives (Ziemba 2005: 139), such paintings did not present to the audience their own reactions; neither did they, as is the case in Rembrandt's celebrated *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* (1632), reproduce any real description of the autopsy. In the tableau she conjures up, Tokarczuk seems thus to draw both on the painting convention which foregrounded the anatomist as well as on drawings and prints, which tended to include the public, such as Willem Pieterszoon Buytewech's drawing *A Demonstration in*

¹⁶ "Tableau" is used here as defined by Tzvetan Todorov (2008: 200; see also 1967: 2019), i.e. as a "description of events and phenomena."

¹⁷ There are also abundant portrayals of physicians, chemists and treatment scenes in Dutch art. See Jacqueline Dyer (2019).

¹⁸ Nevertheless, there is an ekphrasis in the description of Holland. Namely, Tokarczuk depicts Adriaen Backer's *Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Frederik Ruysch* (1670).

the *Leiden Anatomy Theatre* (ca. 1600) and an engraving by J.C. Visscher, who modelled his portrayal of the public autopsy on J.C. Woudanus's (*The Anatomy Theatre of the University of Leiden*, 1610). In the description of the show in Amsterdam, the pictorial tradition is the source of the centrally-situated table with the dead body placed on it and ready for the first cut, represented in compliance with medical knowledge (as featured in Rembrandt's partially preserved painting *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Deijman* [1656] and in *Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Willem van der Meer* by the Mierevelts [1617]), which was not always taken into account by Dutch painters. The legacy of printmakers and engravers resonates in Van Horssen's commentaries and remarks about the responses of the public. The literary image of the Amsterdam anatomy lesson is produced by blending descriptive strategies – specifically through adopting the visual perspectives of the narrator and the protagonist, with simultaneous reliance on the artistic renderings of this vital theme in Dutch painting, drawing and printmaking.

2.1.2.2. The scholar's home

As mentioned above, among the images of Holland in *Flights* there are also interiors of houses. Their selection is symptomatic, for Tokarczuk does not evoke the sights which are deeply entrenched in Dutch painting: neither church interiors (e.g. Pieter Jansz Saendram, Emanuel de Witte) nor burgher homes (e.g. Vermeer), nor peasant homesteads (e.g. Adriaen van Ostade, Jan Steen) are to be found in the book. Instead, it features the households of scholars in which intimate spaces are combined with research laboratories that are, at the same time, embryonic *panoptica* – curiosity cabinets. Our view of these unusual places is mediated by the narrator, who illuminates in them solely the elements of relevance to the ruminations on knowledge and the mystery of the human body. Verheyen's laboratory and Ruysch's house are composed similarly to the image of De Waag, though on these occasions Tokarczuk reduces the descriptions of their appearance and surroundings to a bare minimum in order to fix the viewer's attention on the specificity of the scholar's studio. Hence, these episodes conjure up associations with genre painting.

In Ruysch's laboratory, Tokarczuk foregrounds the table and the anatomist's instruments – the microscope invented by Hans and Zacharias Janssen, modified by the Dutchman Antonie van Leeuwenhoek (whose name is not mentioned) and fitted with the lenses ground by Benedictus Spinoza (Tokarczuk 2017: 192), glasses (Tokarczuk 2017: 191)¹⁹ and devices for drafting anatomical charts

¹⁹ The writer mentions the embalming liquid invented by Ruysch a few times, but passes over the innovative method of applying it by injection (cf. Huisman 2008: 83–84; “Frederick Ruysch and his anatomical collection”: 36–40).

(Tokarczuk 2017: 192, 197–198, 211)²⁰ – and sometimes adds to these paraphernalia the figure of the scholar busy with drawing or performing an autopsy (Tokarczuk 2017: 197–198, 211–212). The portrayals of the Dutch anatomists' studies are redolent of St Jerome's hermitage in Albrecht Dürer's woodcut and in *St. Jerome in His Study*, a painting from Jan van Eyck's workshop.

What captures one's attention in the literary renderings of the Dutch researchers is their gazing. In *Flights*, the scholars are inscribed in the space of thought-movements, which paradoxically revolve around that which is inherently motionless – the dead body. Coming forth within the orbit of cognition, this Baroque contradiction is concomitant with the cult of detail. The duality of human nature coexists with Spinoza's monism, and the contemplation on transience and duration plays an important role in the country whose geographical location makes the population vulnerable to insecurity and demands special exertions to wrestle with nature. Tokarczuk underlines that “the detail mirrors the whole, but the whole can only be a silhouette which is sensed rather than actually seen” (Niemczyńska 2007: 14). Holland, where *Flights* was completed,²¹ is represented by scholars whom the Polish critic Andrzej Franaszek interprets as symbolic figures. According to Franaszek, Verheyen is situated in between characters that embody two varieties of knowledge: on the one hand, Ruysch, who epitomises empirical knowledge (autopsies), and on the other hand Spinoza, who represents direct knowledge (lenses) and indirect, theoretical knowledge as a philosopher who considered the material and the immaterial to be intertwined in the universe (Franaszek 2007: 14). The scopic activity of Verheyen (Tokarczuk 2017: 189–190, 197–198, 203, 211–212) and Ruysch (Tokarczuk 2017: 208–209) is an important trope of the culture of the Netherlands.

Ruysch's house is presented in a fragmentary manner. Tokarczuk mentions only traces of the collection of anatomical specimens which was sold to Tsar Peter I. The rooms as such, emptied of the items accumulated over thirty years (Tokarczuk 2017: 222–223) and known to us through engravings of Cornelis Huyberts, St Petersburg's Wunderkammer and a painting by Jana van Neck,²² are

²⁰ Ruysch produced *Thesaurus anatomicus primus* (1701), *Thesaurus anatomicus secundus* (1702), *Thesaurus anatomicus tertius* (1703), *Thesaurus anatomicus quartus* (1704), *Thesaurus anatomicus quintus* (1705), *Thesaurus anatomicus sextus* (1706), *Thesaurus anatomicus septimus* (1707), *Thesaurus anatomicus octavus* (1708), *Thesaurus anatomicus novus* (1709), *Thesaurus magnus & regius qui est decimus thesaurum anatomicorum. Het grooten konincklyke cabinet zynde het tiende der anatomische cabinetten van Frederic Ruysch* (1715), *Curae posteriors seu Thesaurus anatomicus omnium praecedentium maximus* (1724), *Curae renovatae seu, Thesaurus anatomicus, post curaspostiores, novus* (1728) and *Epistola anatomica, problematica decima & sexta* (1727).

²¹ Tokarczuk was a beneficiary of Dutch foundations, such as for example the Nederlands Letterenfonds. She stayed in Amsterdam from January to April 2007. She also received support from the Belgian Passa Porta – International House of Literature in Brussels.

²² In a painting entitled *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Frederik Ruysch* (1638), the anatomist's son Hendrik is holding one of his compositions: a miniature skeleton atop a wooden plinth with its

not given any attention, but the exhibits that disappear from them are described in a lengthy catalogue (Tokarczuk 2017: 222–224).

2.1.2.3. The scholar's gaze

In the descriptions of the anatomists' laboratories, the foreground is reserved for the scholar figures, the acts of looking and their outcomes. The accounts provided by both the narrator and the protagonists are organised around the operations of vision and observations performed by a moving character in a fixed setting – a flat (Hamon 2011: 150) or the *theatrum anatomicum*.²³ One easily notices that the Dutch interiors in *Flights* are composed not so much to convey the distinctive style of Dutch households or to expose their aesthetic qualities as rather to present the studies and *panoptica* they house as well as anatomical drawings produced in them. These are what the protagonists' gaze is as a rule fixed on. This kind of possibly the most precise scrutiny gave a major thrust to the development of the knowledge of man and the world, and the observations it generated exerted not only an epistemological impact but also an aesthetic influence.

Flights refers to the *Corporis Humani Anatomia* and the drawing talent of Verheyen, who rendered his observations based on the anatomical specimens of his own making in a graphic form with an exceptional accuracy (Tokarczuk 2017: 193, 197–198, 211–212). The descriptions of drawings, especially of the plate showing the newly discovered Achilles tendon, are enveloped in weighty meditations on looking and knowing. The question “How could this tendon never have been noticed?” (Tokarczuk 2017: 193) is answered with “It's hard to believe that parts of one's body are discovered as if one was forging one's way upriver in search of sources. [...] One discovers, and names. Conquers and civilizes” (Tokarczuk 2017: 193). This exchange expresses an outlook shaped by the worldview earlier propagated in the Netherlands by Descartes and by Spinoza's ideas, which Verheyen both endorses and challenges. The Dutch anatomist's thinking reverberates in the book's reflection on the entropic world. Looking is absolutely essential to him as a prerequisite for the study of that which exists, and the knowledge it yields is supposed to free people from the thrall of emotions which cause their unhappiness (Tokarczuk 2017: 218). These insights, which transcend anatomy, confirm his belief that physiology and theology are the pillars of knowledge.

The image of Holland conjured up in *Flights* is complemented with descriptions of Ruysch's anatomical compositions, which are referred to as “elegant sculptures” (Tokarczuk 2017: 205). The extraordinary specimens are shaped in

right arm stretched up, which corresponds to the corpse of a child which is being anatomised. Cf. Julie V. Hansen (1996: 666).

²³ This is implied by the verbs which express looking, e.g. “examines” (188), “observes” (191), and “looks” (192), as well as activities that result from looking: sketches (189), to detach the tissues and vessels (191), points (192).

the semblance of artefacts and their fashioning evokes associations with invention known from painting (Hansen 1996: 665). Combining anatomical specimens (therein anomalies which fascinate Charlotta Ruysch [Tokarczuk 2017: 223–224]) with symbolic elements (the sickle as an emblem of death) and decorative items (lace), furnished with maxims in “elegant lettering” (Tokarczuk 2017: 205–206), they form “a panopticum of the human imagination broken down into component parts, a mechanical cosmos of organs” (Tokarczuk 2017: 222), where beauty blends with ugliness and nature with culture receptive knowledge and contradictions. The Dutch scholar’s collection also serves in the book to signal the role that reflection on time plays in the culture of Holland. The unusual specimens form an ensemble of contrivances which are located between things and semiophores, which Krzysztof Pomian defines as signs referring to the past and various values (Pomian 1990: 26). The will to cross the boundaries of knowledge and the attempt at framing it in an orderly structure are an expression of triumph over chaos and of an interest in the human body, which contributed to the rise of the Wunderkammer (Eco 2009: 201 pass.). They also attest to the courage of transcending the fear of the mystery or identity. Considered impure, the dead human body inspired anxiety because, as stressed by Julia Kristeva, it “disturbs identity, system, order” (Kristeva 1982: 4), while fathoming the body restored harmony even if achieving this required overcoming dread and disgust. These efforts also produced a surprising outcome – the ruthlessness of time was surmounted because the anatomical specimens preserved what was doomed to inevitable dissolution.

3. Conclusion

In terms of imagology, Holland as represented in *Flights* is thus a place which the subject-narrator’s consciousness is located in the space of the *panopticum* understood as a locus of epistemological experiences (Wieliczko-Paluch 2015: 113–115) focussed around looking. The country occupies a prominent place on the world map of the book’s protagonist and of contemporary culture, which is highly relevant, given that cartography is always an interpretation of facts (Wintle 2007: 275). For Tokarczuk appreciates the micro-scale world more. So if she observes that “[t]here are two points of view in the world: the frog’s perspective and bird’s eye view” (Tokarczuk 2017: 184), she in fact upholds the former. In her prose, she uses the binocular strategy (Zawada 2014), which makes it possible to scrutinise things from close up and discern what is essential though difficult to perceive. In *Flights*, Holland is thus a place where gazing is a crucial element of the culture that enables the individual who seeks identity and harmony to undergo a metamorphosis (Wieliczko-Paluch 2015: 110–111) which helps

overcome entropy. The image of the Netherlands outlined by Tokarczuk within the framework of looking is free from stereotypes and remote from “touristic” snapshots and postcard-like representations. Emphasising the images registered by the attentive eye, Tokarczuk neither rejects the visions of Dutch painters (self-images as they certainly are) nor reproduces them uncritically. Holland is also essential to her in its present state because of the traces of the struggles against chaos in which people engaged several hundred years ago. The Dutch, the stereotypical representations of whom have fluctuated between the images of the merchant and the preacher (Leerssen 2007a: 142), are envisaged within a specific epistemological framework which has been pivotal to the history of the Netherlands and the culture of the West and which the book filters through the prism of selective attention as forged by the present-day Occident.

Spinoza’s belief that due to intuitive knowledge “we will experience great relief and purification. We will no longer be unsettled by the loss of our belongings, by the passage of time, by ageing or death. In this way we will gain control over our affects and attain some peace of mind” (Tokarczuk 2017: 217) is bound up with ocular cognition. Holland can be counted among the places in the world that Tokarczuk finds highly important. By exploring its literary image within the imagological framework, we can not only identify the ways of constructing a representation of the Netherlands by a member of another culture, but also establish how the present is related to the past. The image of Holland’s past, looking back to a moment when the identity of its dwellers had already been formed (Leerssen 2007a: 142), is part of the palimpsestic vision of the present that reveals anxieties with which people were familiar and tried to come to terms centuries ago (Blekker 2008).

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