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## ABSTRACT

Reader-response theories evolved as a reaction against text-based approaches, which disregard any consideration of the role of the author and the reader in the creation of meaning. According to reader-response critics, readers are not considered passive consumers of a text; on the contrary, they become significant and active agents whose role is essential to the meaning of a text. Consequently, the present study based on Olga Tokarczuk's novel *Flights*, in particular, one of the short stories called "Flights" investigates the process of reading and how readers actively construct and produce meaning. Important concepts such as realization, determinate and indeterminate meaning, and implied and actual reader are explored. A stylistic approach is carried out to provide a better understanding of "Flights" and to justify why this short story can be seen as a reflection of the whole novel. The analysis shows how readers can use their imagination, always within the limits of the texts, to interpret both the short story and the novel. Different interpretations arise during the experience of reading and connections between the sections of the novel can also be established.



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

"When we have been particularly impressed by a book, we feel the need to talk about it (...) We have undergone an experience, and now we want to know consciously what we have experienced."

Wolfgang Iser

*Flights* (2017), the English translation of the novel *Bieguni* (2007), was written by the Polish writer and psychologist Olga Tokarczuk. Author of eight novels and two short-story collections, she has received one of the most prestigious prizes for Polish literature: the Nike 2008 Literary Award for her literary work *Bieguni*. Although Olga Tokarczuk has been a best-selling author in Poland for decades, she was not well known outside her homeland until she became the country's first author to win the Man Booker International Prize in 2018 for *Flights*. She was also awarded the 2018 Nobel Prize in Literature "for a narrative imagination that with encyclopedic passion represents the crossing of boundaries as a form of life" (Nobel Prize Outreach, 2021). Another important figure besides Olga Tokarczuk is the translator of *Flights* named Jennifer Croft, an American author, critic and translator, who translates from Polish, Ukrainian and Argentine Spanish. For the translation of this novel, she has won the Found in Translation Award, an annual award for the best translation of Polish literature into English (The Polish Book Institute, 2018).

From the moment readers set eyes on *Flights*, it becomes evident that the novel is not a traditional narrative. Heterogeneity and fragmentation can be considered its main characteristics. Olga Tokarczuk has famously referred to her novel as a 'constellation novel' (GBH Forum Network, 2018) because it steadily reveals an extremely complex structure, creating a web of interconnections and encouraging a profound interaction on the part of the reader. Moreover, this novel has a purposefully nonlinear narrative as the events are portrayed out of chronological order; they do not follow a linear pattern. Not only does this nonlinear structure resemble a traveller's mind remembering a travel experience, but also it mirrors the reader's mind working on *Flights*, skipping from one thought to another, making connections, and jumping to conclusions. The novel incorporates many genres and styles such as short stories, essays, letters, travel accounts, historical fiction, and personal memoirs. It includes 116 pieces of varying length, some fictional and some based on historical fact, narrated by the same nameless female traveller, who alternates between first-person and third-person narration. Multiple voices, multiple plots, and multiple places are part of this novel together with the presence of photographs of maps and drawings that contribute to the meaning of the whole piece of work. This multiplicity accounts for the recurring tropes: the human body, motion and migration.

At first, *Flights* may seem just like a collection of short stories; in the end, readers may realize that all these seemingly separate stories, experiences, and historical artifacts are closely interconnected. Threads are running throughout the whole novel connecting all the fragments. Sometimes these threads are visible

because the author makes them explicit through the incremental repetition of words or phrases, the same disturbing atmosphere, or the same themes, but other times they are hidden and readers have to become engaged and actively involved in the reading process to be able to find them. As this is a 'constellation novel', readers may find different connections among the pieces and a variety of possible interpretations may occur. This means that readers adopt a new consumer profile known as 'prosumer' (Scolari, 2013), a portmanteau word that amalgamates the notions of producer and consumer. Readers become active consumers that participate in the construction of meaning. In other words, readers are both textual consumers and producers of meaning, who interact with the different fragments and are responsible for their own construction of meaning and interpretation of the texts.

The aim of the present paper is to analyse one of the short stories within *Flights* called "Flights", which can be considered as a representation of the novel as a whole. This will be done by following a stylistic analysis in order to gain insight into the story. The role of the reader is essential to construct the meaning of this novel; hence, reader-response theory will be applied to the short story "Flights" and key concepts such as realization, determinate and indeterminate meaning, and implied and actual reader will be explored. The present study is significant because, to my knowledge, at least in English, no previous analysis following a stylistic approach has been done on the role of the reader in Olga Tokarczuk's novel *Flights*.

The selection of this story has not been randomly made and many reasons can justify the choice. To begin with, it appears not accidentally near the books' centre and it is key to the understanding of the complexity of the whole novel. Besides, the title of the novel is employed again for this story, emphasizing the importance of this particular text. Finally, this short story reproduces the whole novel at a minor scale. Some of the themes and some of the formal techniques of the novel are presented here on a small scale such as the image of hell, the themes of motion and escape, the change from first-person to third-person narration, and intertextual instances just to name a few. In other words, this section condenses the multiple concerns and formal aspects of the rest of the text.

The body of this paper will be organized according to the conventions of the genre. In the Literature Review, emphasis will be placed on giving a general outline of the meaning of stylistics and what a stylistic analysis involves. Also, reader-response criticism will be developed to provide an understanding of the theory, its origins, and its main characteristics. Besides, space will be given to the concepts of realization, determinate and indeterminate meaning, and implied and actual reader. Following the Literature Review, a stylistic analysis of the short story in terms of figures of speech, lexis, and grammar as well as in terms of narrative structure will be carried out together with an exploration of the reading process and the active role of the reader in the construction of meaning. Finally, the Conclusion will summarize the main aspects of the



investigation and present the results. This section will also deal with the limitations the present study offers and possible solutions to overcome such difficulties.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section will include the meaning of stylistics and expand on how to conduct a stylistic analysis. Also, this will illustrate the main characteristics and origins of reader-response theory together with a classification of the theory into five theoretical perspectives. The concept of reader, realization, and meaning will be explored as well.

### 2.1 Stylistic Analysis

"The web, then, or the pattern, a web at once sensuous and logical, an elegant and pregnant texture: that is style."

**Robert Louis Stevenson**

Stylistics is a branch of applied linguistics that emerged as a way of applying linguistic models to literary texts. According to Widdowson, stylistics is "the study of literary discourse from a linguistic orientation" (2013:3). Short and Candlin (1989) define it as an approach to the analysis of literary texts using linguistic description.

However, the term contains several definitions and has been controversial because of the numerous stylistic approaches which analysts may adopt. These different approaches are "due to the main influences of linguistics and literary criticism" (Wales, 2011: 399). Widdowson (2013) considers stylistics as the link between the disciplines of literary criticism and linguistics whereas Crystal (2008) views stylistics as a part of linguistics that studies certain aspects of language variation and, in this sense, analysts focus on the reasons behind the particular linguistic choices made by the author. According to Leech and Short (2007), style can be defined as the choices made from the repertoire of the language by a particular author in a particular text. They define stylistics as the linguistic study of style, which, in general, is concerned with explaining the relation between language and artistic function (Leech and Short, 2007). The goal of most stylistics is to demonstrate how a text functions: "but not simply to describe the formal features of texts for their own sake, but in order to show their functional significance for the interpretation of the text; or in order to relate literary effects to linguistic 'causes' where these are felt to be relevant" (Wales, 2011: 400).

Leech and Short (2007) propose a method that can be used in analysing the style of a prose text. They provide a checklist of features placed under four general headings: lexical categories, grammatical categories, figures of speech, and cohesion and context. They state that writers, as well as texts, have

individual qualities. Thus features that are meaningful in one text will not necessarily be relevant in another text by the same or another writer. Readers have to understand the artistic effect of the whole and how linguistic details fit into this whole (Leech and Short, 2007).

A purely objective description of style is not possible to produce due to the complex nature of languages; however, Leech and Short (2007) state that working out the frequencies of the linguistic properties of a given text may be a more possible aim. These frequencies may be measured in terms of deviations from the norm, a marked prominence, or by foregrounding, a type of intentional deviation from arts, which can be "qualitative, i.e. deviation from the language code itself – a breach of some rule or convention of English – or it may simply be quantitative, i.e. deviance from some expected frequency" (Leech and Short, 2007: 38).

It should be mentioned that, as Beach states, the interpretation of a text requires the figure of the author as well as the reader. Authors make assumptions about their audience's knowledge of text conventions and develop their narrative with that audience in mind (Beach, 1993) while readers assume a highly active role in the interpretative process and bring into the text previous literary experiences and background knowledge (Bressler, 1994). The personal situation of the readers has consequences on the understanding of a literary work (Beach, 1993).

## 2.2 Reader-Response Criticism

"A writer (...) has numerous choices as to how to fashion their material, and the choices reflect and create differences of effect, emphasis, and interpretation."

**Michael Toolan**

Reader-response criticism is a school of literary theory that focuses on readers' reactions to literary texts (Cuddon, 2013). Like most approaches to literary analysis, reader-response criticism does not provide a single methodological approach for textual analysis. However, all reader-response critics share a concern for the reader and believe: "(1) that the role of the reader cannot be omitted from our understanding of literature, and (2) that readers do not passively consume the meaning presented to them by an objective literary text; rather they actively make the meaning they find in literature" (Tyson, 2015: 178). The role of the reader is essential to the meaning of a text since a literary work exists only during the reading experience. Readers must act upon the textual material and become active agents in the creation of meaning (Iser, 1980; Beach, 1993). They are involved in a negotiation between the text's inherited meaning and their interpretation through the lens of their background knowledge and experience. Thus, there is a mutual relationship in the interpretative process between the reader and the text (Bressler, 1994).

Beach (1993) classifies reader-response theory into five theoretical perspectives according to the particular aspect being highlighted in the interaction between reader, text and context during the construction of meaning of a literary work. The textual perspective focuses on how readers apply knowledge of genre conventions to respond to specific text features. The psychological perspective concentrates on readers' intellectual development, cognitive abilities and processes, and subconscious forces such as wishes, desires, or thoughts, and the experiential perspective centres on readers' processes of engagement and involvement with a text. The social perspective focuses on how responses may be shaped by the readers' social roles and their social context. Finally, the cultural perspective highlights both the readers' cultural attitudes and values, and the broader cultural, historical context (Beach, 1993).

Reader-response theory gained prominence in literary analysis in the early 1970s, particularly in Germany and the US, in the works of Wolfgang Iser, Roland Barthes, Norman Holland, Stanley Fish, and David Bleich. However, it emerged during the 1920s and 1930s as a reaction against the text-oriented theories of Formalism and the New Criticism, which have tended to ignore the reader's role in the creation of meaning (Cuddon, 2013; Tyson, 2015). The historical roots of reader-response criticism can be traced back to I.A. Richards and Louise Rosenblatt (Davis and Womack, 2002). According to Richards, the reader is no longer a passive receiver of knowledge, but becomes an active participant in the interpretive process and the construction of meaning (Bressler, 1994). Louise Rosenblatt further develops Richards' assumptions and emphasizes that the reader plays a vital role in any piece of literature (Rosenblatt, 1995). She also states that the reading process is a transaction between the text and the reader, in which the text guides the reader to an understanding of its meaning and also triggers in the reader's mind individual feelings, associations, and emotions (Adamson, 2019). For Rosenblatt, the text acts as a "stimulus activating elements of the reader's past experience—his experience both with literature and with life (...) the text serves as a blueprint, a guide for the selecting, rejecting, and ordering of what is being called forth; the text regulates what shall be held in the forefront of the reader's attention" (Rosenblatt, 1978: 11). While reading a text, previous knowledge, feelings, and memories occur and influence the way in which readers make sense of a text. At some points of the reading experience, however, the text can function as a guide so that readers can modify their interpretations if they have gone too far afield of what is written on the page (Adamson, 2019).

The blueprint and stimulus functions of the text can be explained in connection with two types of meaning that every text offers: determinate meaning and indeterminate meaning (Tyson, 2015). Determinate meaning refers to the written part of the text that gives readers knowledge while indeterminate meaning, or indeterminacy, refers to the unwritten part of the text, to the 'gaps' in the text which allow or even invite readers to use their imagination and create a multiplicity of possible interpretations. Thus, one text is potentially capable of numerous different realizations because each individual reader will fill in the gaps in his/her own way (Iser, 1980). To explain this idea, Iser employs the metaphor of the sky during nighttime: "two people gazing at the night sky may both be looking at the same collection of stars, but one

will see the image of a plough, and the other will make out a dipper. The 'stars' in a literary work are fixed; the lines that join them are variable" (Iser, 1980:57). The stars stand for the written parts or information contained in the text, and the lines represent the unwritten text that arises interpretations that will vary from reader to reader, but only within the limits of the written part. Interestingly enough, even the same reader will arrive at a different interpretation after a second reading because "on repeated viewings a text allows and, indeed induces innovative reading" (Iser, 1980: 56).

As regards the concept of 'reader', Iser distinguishes between the 'implied reader' and 'actual reader'. An 'implied reader' is a hypothetical figure or the author's image of the recipient that a work seems to be addressed to (Tyson, 2015; Davis & Womack, 2002). This definition may be equated to the term 'intended reader' proposed by W. Daniel Wilson to refer to a writer's conception of their audience (Wilson, as cited in Beach, 1993:25). This 'implied reader' discovers the determinate meaning of a text. In contrast, the 'actual reader' can be defined as the individual reader who brings his or her personal experience and background information to a text (Cuddon, 2013). This 'actual reader' fills the gaps in the text and discovers the indeterminate meaning. The implied and actual reader coexist and combine to construct the meaning of a given text. "They are one and the same person responding to a text in different ways and at different levels of consciousness" (Cuddon, 2013: 358).

According to Iser (1980), during the experience of reading, the interplay between determinate and indeterminate meaning results in several ongoing experiences involved in the act of critical interpretation for the reader: retrospection; anticipation of what will come next; modification of expectations, and building and breaking of illusions that result in an organization and reorganization of the data in the text. Thus, reading is an active and creative process involving the text and the imagination of the reader.

### 3. ANALYSIS

This section will be divided into four subsections. First, it will provide a preliminary analysis of the title of the novel *Flights* as well as the short story "Flights". Second, elements of fiction such as plot, setting, characters, main themes, and point of view will be explored in order for the reader to acquire a better and deeper understanding of the short story. In the following subsection, two types of textual analysis will be conducted by considering the relationship between the choice of language and its literary effect (Leech and Short, 2007; Wales, 2011) together with the frequencies of linguistic properties (Leech and Short, 2007). Certain linguistic features and stylistic categories of the checklist developed by Leech and Short (2007) will be used for the stylistic analysis of "Flights", namely figures of speech, lexis and grammar. This will also include an examination of the organizational framework of the story after a first reading. Finally, other realizations after a second reading of this short story will be included and how the reader actively constructs meaning will also be investigated.

### 3.1 Interpretation of the Title: *Flights* and "Flights"

As regards the title of the novel, it becomes relevant for the analysis to explore the meaning of the original version and its translation. The choice of the title becomes an important part of the creative process of the author as the selection may indicate what the fictional work is supposed to be about. The title of a book is the very first element that readers encounter; hence, it contains significant power to grab and condition the readers' interest and attention (Lodge, 1992). The original Polish title is *Bieguni*. In Polish, nouns can be divided into three genders: masculine, feminine and neutral. Masculine nouns are further subdivided into personal (human being), animate (animal) and inanimate. The inanimate noun *biegun* means 'pole', and can refer both to the North and the South Pole; its plural is *bieguny* (Cambridge, 2021). The personal noun *biegun*, whose plural form is *bieguni* with an '-i', refers to an orthodox sect from eighteenth-century Russia, who believed that being in constant motion prevented the triumph of evil. Sin had to be escaped both mentally and physically through permanent movement and members had to walk or run from one place to another. In other words, members rejected settled life for an existence of being in constant motion (The Polish Book Institute, 2018). This last definition is key to the understanding of the novel because it evokes the theme of wandering. *Biegun* is not a common word in Poland and, in fact, the definition of this term can be found on the back cover of the Polish book. However, the English translation of the title is *Flights*, which becomes more general than the original and contains more connotations. Although the English title does not suggest 'wandering', it brings other implications to the translation that enrich the work and also evokes the actions of the Russian sect, who constantly took flight from place to place. According to *Longman Exams Dictionary* (2006), the word 'flight' means 'a journey in a plane', 'movement through air' and also 'escape'. The absence of the term *bieguni* in English may be a possible reason for the change in translation because it would result in strangeness for a reader from a different cultural background. Despite the difference in terms of specification, both versions share the theme of movement: characters move through towns, cities, memories, thoughts, and feelings, and readers also move backwards and forwards during the reading process of this literary work.

### 3.2 Elements of Fiction

Plot, setting, characters, themes, and point of view constitute the most important elements of fiction. Hence, the present subsection will provide a general outline of each of them so that the reader can develop a better understanding of the short story.

"Flights" is divided into mini-scenes marked by a double space or suspension dots between paragraphs to organize the narrative and indicate a scene change. In this piece of fiction, a woman leaves her disabled son and husband and spends the days aimlessly walking along the freezing streets, hopping on

buses, and riding the metro. During her wanderings, she finds herself drawn to a shrouded woman who is constantly muttering words. Her obsession for deciphering what this female figure is expressing increases and she goes through a transformation both physical and mental.

As regards the setting, the story takes place during the cold month of December in different places of Moscow such as the apartment where Annushka, the protagonist, and her family live, the metro station, the church, the streets, and the police station. The atmosphere is dense, gloomy, and disturbing.

In connection with characters, Annushka was born in Vorkuta in the late sixties. She is a devoted housewife who can no longer tolerate the wrenching inertia of her life. In order to escape from reality and the weight of an oppressive home life, she leaves her apartment and spends the days traveling. She feels free and happy during her wanderings because she does not have any responsibilities. She experiences a sense of protection and safety when travelling with a crowd of people by metro: "She feels as though from all sides she is being embraced affectionately and rocked by reassuringly kind hands" (Tokarczuk, 2017: 250). This may emphasize how lonely Annushka feels at home as her family does not show clear signs of affection. As the days go by, her aspect becomes careless and untidy. In addition, 'the shrouded woman' is an important character, who wanders around the city muttering something to herself. Her name, Galina, appears only three times in the narrative since the focus of the story appears not to be on the identity of the character herself but on her role as a wanderer representing a typical *bieguni*. As regards her appearance, "she's dressed differently from all of them" (Tokarczuk, 2017: 232). Her way of looking is compared to the pedestrians'. She is a homeless woman with an unkempt appearance, who wears multiple layers of clothing and a cloth wrapped around her head. It is very interesting to notice that only her mouth can be seen shouting out curses. The mouth is connected with speech and communication, and becomes almost a door that lends access to the soul of a person. Through her strong speech, which appears in the following section of the novel, readers can discover her actual thoughts and beliefs about the world and understand her behaviour. There are minor characters such as Annushka's husband, whose name is not given. This man has come back from war with both physical and psychological damage. This couple has a son called Petya, who suffers from a disease that has no cure.

The main themes of this story revolve around mobility and fluidity, and the narrator is third-person omniscient, also known as extradiegetic narration (Genette, 1980). The author has made the narratorial decision to place the narrator outside the scene to fulfil a number of functions in the narrative text. To begin with, third-person omniscient has a narrative function because, technically, it is he or she who presents the fictional world, works on setting, and shows characters in context. The method of this narrator is discursive because this narrator enters the mind, the soul, and the heart of the characters through narration; it narrates or communicates feelings, thoughts, and experiences from the outside. Besides, the narrator performs

certain functions related to the communicative situation of narration such as addressing the reader and making metanarrative comments, and also acts as a kind of philosopher or moralist. Naturally, all these functions often become blurred in the sentences, and the functions are combined (Fludernik, 2009). The language of the omniscient is quite detailed, descriptive, and poetic.

A technique by means of which the novel breaks from a homogenous and linear narration is the alternation between first-person and third-person narrator in the narrative sections of the novel. The narrator tries to organize the experience of reading and to convey some meaning to the fragments she narrates. In other words, the change of narrators emerges as a strategy for organization. First-person narrator emerges in sympathy with readers since they may feel overwhelmed and confused by the amount of information channelled through the content narrated and the diversity of genres. This can be illustrated in the following passage when two particular male passengers attract Annushka's attention on the metro journey:

"Why does she remember those two? I suspect because they're constant somehow, as they moved differently, more slowly. Everyone else is like a river, a current, water that flows from here to there (...) but those two move against the current (...) I think that this is what attracts Annushka" (Tokarczuk, 2017: 248).

The narrator seems to spot that confusion, words it into a question, and provides an answer with attempts at organizing the information for the reader. At the same time, this organization proceeds in terms of explanation and comparison. The narrator accounts for the peculiar nature of her memory, circumscribed to the two passengers: they seem to 'move against the current', unlike the rest who follow a predetermined course of movement. Finally, when the narrator expresses her beliefs as regards the reasons why Annushka feels attracted towards them, she is creating a parallelism between them. They behave contrary to the majority of others and do not abide by conventions in the same way as the novel does not follow the rule of a linear and constant narration.

Another strategy employed to show a sympathetic attitude towards readers so as to help them understand the content of the narration is the use of the pronoun 'you'. This use can be illustrated, for example, when describing the features of hell such as its intransigence: "The next thing hell does is drag you out of sleep. You can kick and scream" (Tokarczuk, 2017:227). The narrator introduces the image of hell without making reference to a particular character or situation. At this point in the narration, which is the beginning, the reader does not have enough information to relate this description to any specific part of the story. However, the narrator seems to consider this notion as relevant for the reader to understand what the character will eventually go through. Instead of making an immediate reference to the events of the story,

the narrator activates the reader's previous knowledge and experiences to understand the complexity of this concept that would be otherwise too abstract.

### 3.3 Stylistic Analysis

#### 3.3.1 Textual Analysis in terms of Figures of Speech, Lexis, and Grammar

Following the method of analysis employed by Leech and Short (2007) and the frequency of linguistic properties within the text (Leech and Short, 2007), the following subsection will deal with certain linguistic features organized under the categories of figures of speech, lexis, and grammar.

The text is meticulously detailed, accurate, and multi-sensorial, creating mental images and involving the reader's imagination. Descriptions are made vivid by means of a large number of similes introduced by 'like' and 'as'. For instance, "his breath would smell like fruit" (Tokarczuk, 2017: 229); "its touch is like razor blades, like broken glass" (ibid. 237); "everyone else is like a river" (ibid. 24) and "he's there (...) heavy as a stone" (ibid. 255). Also, quasi-similes literary clauses involving the use of phrases like 'as though' can be found as well: "she feels as though she's caught a big animal" (ibid. 239), "as though the underground had spit her out" (ibid. 248), and "she sleeps as though she were a piece of rock" (ibid. 249). These similes that are concrete metaphors are employed to define entities (e.g. breath and touch) that are beyond understanding through the lens of something familiar (e.g. fruit, razor blades, and broken glass). Besides, the frequent and detailed sensorial imagery present in the text is realized through metaphors such as "a ceaseless stream of curses" (ibid. 232) and "the mouths of the underground trains (...) the cold wind pierces through her coat" (ibid. 237) and personification as in "hell likes to shock" (ibid. 227), "the escalators won't permit her" (ibid. 237) and "stubborn waves" (ibid. 249), which enable readers to reconstruct the entire scene.

Most of the nouns are concrete, which refer to travel (metro, bus, train, ticket, cars) and places (police station, church, station, kiosk, cemetery, buildings, pharmacy). The high frequency of these nouns accounts for the theme of movement since both the main character and the shrouded woman are constantly travelling to several places by different means of transport. There is an occurrence of nouns in relation to clothes (overcoat, cap, boots, trousers, shirts, vests, skirts), which may emphasize all the layers of clothing characters have to wear due to bad weather conditions and may stand as a metaphor for the layers of meaning this short story and the novel contain. Moreover, nouns in connection with food (sandwiches, cheese, tomatoes, roll, bread, pepper) appear in "Flights" and may have two possible interpretations. First, food can represent the element that brings Annushka closer to the shrouded woman because, on their first encounter, Annushka offers to buy her some food in order to gain her trust. Second, food can stand as a symbol of love and affection. As Annushka becomes a homeless person, she does not have food or what it



represents. In addition, there is a number of nouns referring to body parts (legs, eyes, face, head, heart, shoulders, hands), which highlights the significance of the body, another of the themes of the novel. Also, abstract nouns can be found in connection to emotions (joy, sadness), feelings (fear, pleasure), states (darkness, gloom), and conditions (illness, disease). These nouns may contribute to the creation of atmosphere and may become functional for the understanding of the internal and external change of the main character. A number of proper names in connection with religion can be found (Virgin, God, Christ, Saint Parascheva, Savior) since Annushka is a very religious person, whose transformation into a *bieguni* starts in the church.

Verbs carry an important part of the meaning of this narrative. The impression readers get is that there are two linguistic domains connected with mobility and stillness. This contrast emphasizes the beliefs of the *bieguni*, who rejected settled life and believed that they could protect themselves from evil if they remained in constant motion. A high occurrence of lexically loaded dynamic verbs indicating movement can be found: 'go' appears about thirty-five times; 'run' and 'walk', about twelve times each; 'move', seven times and 'sway', four times. There are other ways of walking as well with a rather low frequency like 'tiptoe', 'stagger', 'rush', 'meander', and 'promenade'. Significantly, verbs indicating stillness occur in the text such as 'stop', which is repeated twelve times, and 'freeze', three times.

The largest group of adverbs is that of place, and especially direction (up, down, back, towards). These tend to combine with verbs to emphasize movement and activity (run up, walk down, come back, head towards). The purpose of these adverbs may be to highlight the theme of motion of the novel and this short story. Other adverbs are also rather frequent, fulfilling mainly semantic functions of time (already, soon, never), manner (quickly, anxiously, hurriedly), and degree (quite, very, somewhat) with the intention of organizing the events of the story and helping readers visualize in great detail the scenes of the narrative.

Adjectives are used to render descriptions more dramatic and enrich visual imagery. Some of them refer to colours (yellow, white, black, dark) to contrast vividly between darkness and light and to contribute to the gloomy and disturbing atmosphere of the story. In fact, 'dark' appears more than twelve times and 'black', more than four times. Also, there is a range of adjectives connected with appearance (tall, short, bony), size (big, small, massive), age (old, new), and temperature (hot, cold). Another notable grouping of adjectives, this time morphologically defined, consists of adjectives with the negative prefix UN- (uninterrupted, unkemptness, unbearable) and with IN- (inaudible, indistinct, inhuman). Other adjectives, such as 'disturbing', 'shapeless', 'motionless', 'diabolical' also have a negative element of meaning, which stress the disturbing atmosphere of the story.

Sentences are typically in the simple present tense, which gives the writing a sense of immediacy creating the illusion that the events of the story are unfolding in the present moment. As this may be

confusing for readers because they may be witnessing events as they happen, the narrator helps to organize the reading process. Also, it makes the work feel more cinematic and shortens the distance that is aided by the explanations of the narrator between the reader and the characters. Instances of past perfect are used at the beginning when referring to Annushka's husband and his physical and psychological changes due to the war to indicate a jump back in time for events that happened earlier in the story's timeline and to emphasize how different he has become.

As previously stated, this short story can be considered as a representation of the whole novel and the textual analysis carried out in this section can be applied to *Flights* as well. The presence of figures of speech such as metaphors, similes, and personification together with a large number of adjectives, adverbs and dynamic verbs referring to movement to provide vivid and comprehensive descriptions can be found throughout the whole novel. As many of the pieces of this work deal with themes connected with the body and travelling, several concrete nouns designating body parts, travel and places occur as well as abstract nouns indicating emotions, states and conditions. Besides, the most predominant tense in the novel is the simple present, which creates a sense of intimacy and readers may feel they are experiencing the world of the story through their own eyes.

### 3.3.2 Textual Analysis in terms of Narrative Structure

The complexity of the novel in terms of its writing style translates into a complexity of the experience of reading. A possible way to tackle such difficulty is to approach it by identifying two moments in the process of reading. A first moment relates to the plot of the story and readers are presented with what happens in the narrative: An ordinary Russian woman named Annushka abandons her family for a life in motion on the Moscow metro, becomes obsessed with a homeless woman, goes through a transformation and becomes a wanderer. A second moment implies the challenge for the reader to construct meaning out of that story, a process for which readers need to pay attention to the determinate and indeterminate meaning of the text and fill in the gaps of indeterminacy.

The following analysis will be conducted after the first moment of reading and will explore the organizational framework of "Flights", namely beginning, middle, and end. This story opens up with the image of hell: "Over the world at night hell rises" (Tokarczuk 2017: 226). Not only does the word 'hell' refer to an extremely unpleasant or difficult place, situation, or experience, but also, according to some religions such as the Christians or the Muslims, hell is the place where the Devil lives, usually imaged as being beneath the earth, and where the souls of bad people are sent to be punished after death (Adrian-Vallance, 2006). Both definitions have a negative connotation and both are relevant to the narrative's meaning. As regards the first definition, the image of hell may serve as a metaphor for the miserable life of Annushka and her

whole family, that is, for the dark and troubled state of the characters since they are all suffering emotionally and/or physically. This is also an instance of pathetic fallacy because nature is a symbolic representation of humans and, in this case, nature is in solidarity and aligned to the characters and is anticipating their actions. In connection with the second definition of hell as the place of punishment for the wicked souls, hell is a metaphor for the world and can be found in the underground trains. The frequent repetition of the word 'hell', as it appears seven times, and the use of personification as in "hell disfigures space (...) makes everything more cramped (...) drags out of sleep (...) likes to shock" (Tokarczuk, 2017: 257) may contribute to the creation of a disturbing atmosphere, which will develop in depth in the course of the story.

After this beginning, which is written in an encrypted manner with the purpose of foreshadowing certain situations that will happen later on and of creating the general atmosphere of the story, a pause is physically signalled in the text by means of suspension dots, which is followed by the presentation of moment-by-moment actions of the female character. This character is referred to by the pronoun she, which is used cataphorically. Not until the fourth paragraph is its reference made overt and the name Annushka used for the first time, finally disambiguating who she is. The intensity of this narrative gradually increases as Annushka wanders around Moscow and becomes obsessed with a shrouded woman, who is a female member of the Russian sect, *Bieguni*. Annushka embarks upon a physical and psychological journey: she undergoes a transformation and ends up acting and behaving like this member. She sees this shrouded woman for the first time standing by the exit of the underground station, which may suggest that she is guarding the entrance to the metro or, to put it in other words, the entrance to hell. At first glance, there is a cognitive dissonance between attraction and repulsion because Annushka feels terrified and frightened of this homeless woman whereas, at the same time, she is also attracted to her. As the story unfolds, they spend time together and the homeless woman shows Annushka that there is an escape from her life of suffering. After this meeting, Annushka heads for the church not to pray but to lament herself, and here the peak of the narrative achieves its highest point. Annushka experiences the apparition of a figure:

"...another face emerges from the gloom--the vast face of the gloomy icon. It's a piece of square board hung high, almost right under the dome of the church, and on it the simple features of Christ, painted in shades of brown and grey. The face is dark, against a dark background, with no halo, no crown; only the eyes glow as they stare straight into her (...) she hears a murmur, an underground thunder off in the distance, a vibration below the church's floor" (Tokarczuk, 2017: 234).

This passage is quite significant due to the dramatic tension it produces. Because of the words used to describe this God such as 'gloomy', 'dark', 'shades of brown and gray', and 'no halo, no crown', it can be inferred that this is not the face of God, but the face of the Devil. His eyes look directly into Annushka as if

they could hypnotise, penetrate and capture her. This unbearable and intolerable gaze is emphasized by the vibration the character feels under the ground, which may be produced by the metro or, metaphorically speaking, by the Devil in hell who shakes and trembles the earth, anticipating another appearance. This suggests that the Devil may try to capture Annushka and the only way in which she can escape from him is by movement, as the Russian sect believed. Being constantly in motion becomes her new reality: a reality of mobility that excludes any possibility of settling down. Her transformation into a *bieguni* starts here in the church.

After this experience, Annushka goes down the stairs of the metro station and perceives weakness in the people around her. "She sees the brittleness of arms, the fragility of eyelids (...) how weak their hands are, how weak their legs" (Tokarczuk, 2017: 236). The words chosen to describe the body parts such as 'brittleness', 'fragility' and the repetition of 'weak' reinforce this weak state, suggesting that what the character sees in other individuals may be a reflection of herself because she is projecting on others her emotions. In other words, the outer world is a mirror of her inner world, her inner self. Annushka is both internally and externally weak and will become even weaker as the story unfolds due to a lack of sleep, food, and home. Interestingly enough, this weakness is accompanied by the reappearance of the image of hell:

"The escalators take these beings all straight down into the depths, into the abyss; here are the eyes of the Cerberis in the glass booths (...) The Last Judgment takes place here, in the depths of the metro, lit by crystal chandeliers that cast dead yellow light" (Tokarczuk, 2017: 237).

The encrypted beginning of this short story introduces the notion of hell and anticipates this moment. Hell can be found in the metro and nobody can escape from it. This passage contains the name 'Cerberis', which may refer to Cerberus. In Greek mythology, Cerberus is a monstrous dog with three heads who guards the gates of the underworld; the entrance to Hades, the place where the spirits of dead people are supposed to live (Adrian-Vallance, 2006). Through this instance of intertextuality, the author may be comparing the station agents with these dogs and the metro station with hell. Also, the 'Last Judgment' is mentioned which, according to Christianity and other religions, refers to the time after death when everyone is judged by God for how they behaved when they were alive. Finally, the phrase 'dead yellow light' contributes to the whole gloomy and dark atmosphere of the scene.

After having experienced these two moments, Annushka starts following the shrouded woman and her decline can be perceived both in her appearance and in her behaviour. "Her hair's become greasy (...) the other passengers are somewhat reluctant to sit beside her now (...) she must not look her best" (Tokarczuk, 2017:252). This quotation begins with a description of her dirty hair, expands on how her unkemptness is becoming so strong that the other people do not want to be near her and ends with a metanarrative comment expressed by the narrator about the deplorable image of the character. Definitely, the passing of

days has consequences on her physical appearance. Also, her behaviour is affected by her new reality of being in motion. On one occasion, Annushka witnesses a scene together with the shrouded woman in which a girl wants to tame a horse, a symbol of wilderness. She reacts violently and attacks the girl. Not only does she need to be in motion, but she wants the others to move. She cannot tolerate the fact that the girl forces a wild and free animal such as this horse to remain still. After this incident, she and the shrouded woman end up in the police station and, after a couple of hours, Annushka goes back to her apartment.

The ending of the story is ambiguous. On the one hand, one possible realization could be that the main character eventually enters her apartment. "There is a light that switches on, and she heads for the entrance" (Tokarczuk, 2017: 258). This light may be used as a symbol of hope to conquer darkness and bring order out of chaos. She may go back to her apartment to continue with her life and repair the relationship with her husband. On the other hand, as it happens before, Annushka may decide not to enter because she has transformed into a *bieguni* and may continue living the life as a wanderer. She has faced and adopted a new reality: she has broken ties with her family, abandoned her possessions, and her new way of living is connected with being in permanent motion. Not only can ambiguity and uncertainty be found in this short story, but also these themes occur in many other sections because, as was mentioned before, the very microcosm of this narrative seems to mirror the macrocosm of the whole novel.

### **3.4 Reader-Response Criticism**

#### **3.4.1 The Reading Process**

The emphasis laid upon movement through the title of the short story as well as the novel, the way of living of the characters, and the choice of words may suggest a possible interpretation of "Flights", and the whole novel, as being a metaphor for the reading process. The notion of travel may serve as a code or key revealing how the process of reading this literary piece works. Not only can the themes of movement and travel refer to the characters in the story, but also to readers, who have to respond to this short story as well as the novel through a series of actions: looking back, looking forward, making decisions, modifying expectations and filling in the 'gaps' or 'blanks' left by the texts. As was previously mentioned, "the reading process always involves viewing the text through a perspective that is continually on the move" (Iser, 1980: 56). The experience of reading this novel and, in particular, this short story is a dynamic and active process that mirrors the process of travelling, which consists of decision-making and modification of plans and expectations. In other words, the understanding of this short story is closely tied to the experience of travel and the role of the traveller.

After reading the short story for a second time, new impressions arise and other realizations can be accomplished. For instance, the beginning of the short story can be understood and links can be established between characters, setting and events only in retrospect. Although this beginning serves for the creation of the atmosphere, readers may not comprehend it at first. They may realize how effective and organic it becomes when finishing the story. Besides, readers may build the illusion that Annushka will enter her apartment the first time she heads for it. "She looks up and sees the lights on in her apartment. They must be waiting for her (...) Annushka rushes on, toward their stairwell" (Tokarczuk, 2017: 237). Through this visual description of her gaze towards the lights and her movements, readers may picture all the scene and believe that she will reflect on her previous actions and decide to go back home. However, readers may begin to wonder if she will be able to get into her house because "her legs don't want to take her to her destination, they resist, her steps become smaller and smaller" (ibid.). The lower extremities of her body are being personified and human actions such as wanting and refusing are attributed to them as if her legs had the capacity to decide for themselves. Illusions are eventually broken when reading "as fast as she can she goes back to where she just came from (ibid. 238). Here the narrator explicitly states that the character does not enter and goes back to the metro station. Another interesting instance in which readers may modify their beliefs is connected with the shrouded woman and her words. Because the story is mediated through the narrator, readers do not know what the woman is shouting and may think that what she is expressing has no significance. However, when reading the following section of the novel, readers may modify their ideas and notice the profundity of her thoughts and the depth of her message.

Moreover, a further and deep analysis following a cultural theory of response, which constitutes one of the theoretical perspectives of reader-response theory proposed by Beach (1993), can be provided of the bad figure the shrouded woman wants to escape from. This evil can be read as a metaphor because it condenses another system of signification. It may refer to the world she inhabits: a world ruled by consumerism, an order that encourages the acquisition of goods and services in ever-increasing amounts. The opening of this story foreshadows this idea when stating that "only straight parallel lines remain, the bar code of the world" (Tokarczuk, 2017: 227). As the demand for products increases, the need to produce them also rises resulting in a change from spirituality and community towards competition and materialism. This desire to obtain and possess can only be acquired with a regular income that comes when people sell their souls to the capitalist world or, in other words, the capitalist devil. According to this shrouded woman, the only way in which you can escape is by being in motion. Thus, there is a connection between the 17th-century Russian orthodox sect and global consumerism. This story can also be analysed as criticism towards that belief.

Finally, considering the social and cultural perspective of reader-response theory, this novel together with this short story may represent the world seen from a moving perspective and the wanderers or *bieguni*

may stand as a metaphor for the modern man. The condition of constant mobility is a characteristic of the present society in terms of movement between different social classes and, in a literal sense, movement from and to different places. This constant mobility can be exemplified with Annushka, a female figure moving from a higher position in society to a lower one because she has become a homeless person. Also, this character and others in the novel travel to different towns, cities and countries. Travelling has become a popular phenomenon and an increasing number of people around the world choose to travel due to the enriching experiences that travel brings such as learning more about the world, discovering new cultures and exploring new surroundings. This interpretation of "Flights" and *Flights* as metaphors for the actual world can be related to the notion of 'liquidity' developed by Zygmunt Bauman (2000) in order to capture the dramatic social changes taking place in our everyday lives. According to this sociologist, material objects and romantic relationships will not last long because everything is ephemeral and the world is ruled by fragility. In the short story "Flights", Annushka is a clear example of a person living in a liquid society since she abandons her home and her possessions, and breaks ties with her family.

### 3.4.2 The role of the Reader in the Construction of Meaning

Despite the fragmentation and heterogeneity of *Flights*, the 116 pieces of the novel are closely connected. On the surface, all the sections seem to be unrelated; however, it is very interesting to notice how all the pieces of the novel can be connected to create a sense of wholeness. Certain features of cohesion such as the repetition of words and phrases, the use of words from the same semantic field and the omission of certain elements that can be recoverable from the context indicate the author's concern with the creation of a cohesive and interrelated novel. Therefore, this subsection will illustrate how essential the role of the reader becomes in the interpretative process and how the reader acts upon the story and the novel (Iser, 1980; Tyson, 2015).

To begin with, readers may find a connection between "Flights" and the first fragment of the novel called "Here I am", which corresponds to a short personal memoir that anticipates many of the events of this short story. In "Here I am", the narrator describes the emptiness of the house where she is staying and expresses, as regards the people living there, that "(...) they've left, they're gone" (Tokarczuk, 2017: 1). Although this passage employs the personal pronoun 'they' to refer to the missing members of that place, it may apply to Annushka, who has left her house and abandoned her family. A semantic field connected with disappearing is also present in this first piece reinforcing the idea of leaving and words such as "departed (...) vanishing (...) leave (...) extinguished (...)" (ibid. 2) can be found, which foreshadow that a character may leave or disappear. It may be worth mentioning that many of the characters of the novel go away in different narratives either because they die or vanish. Besides, the notion of remaining still is expressed in "the worst

part is the stillness" (ibid.). This may be linked to the shrouded woman, who believes that the world has fallen under the rule of the Devil and she needs to get moving to avoid him, and to Annushka, who has changed her reality and adopted a life in motion. She also refuses stillness and being motionless is the hardest part for her. Descriptions of the objects in "Here I am" also bear a resemblance with the ones described at the beginning of "Flights". Darkness and hell spoil the appearance of them and, as a result, they lose their main characteristics and become unrecognizable. The following passage from "Here I am" describes how borders disappear and structures lose their shapes: "the contours of the buildings (...) slowly lose their sharp angles, corners, edges" (ibid. 1). Readers may find a similar description in "Flights" about distorted objects: "they lose their features, becoming squat and indistinct (...) now they look like shapeless bodies" (ibid. 227). Adjectives with a negative connotation are employed here to name the consequences of darkness on different entities and conjure brooding feelings. Finally, through certain literary devices and techniques in "Here I am" such as setting, imagery and diction, the author creates a depressing halo and a gloomy and dark atmosphere that has a lasting power and an emotional resonance in the reader. This sense evoked in this part serves a very important purpose for the whole literary work and also becomes functional for "Flights" since there is an incremental repetition of words referring to darkness such as dark and black in this short story, contributing to the same gloomy and dark atmosphere of the beginning.

In addition, there is a relationship between "Flights" and the previous and following section, which illustrates how both the implied and the actual reader work together to connect all the different pieces. The previous narrative called "Mobility is reality" is a very short passage of only three sentences, which is a slogan for mobile phones plastered on a glass wall. The title of this passage contains a word related to the field of movement, reinforcing the main theme of perpetual motion. This slogan is repeated again in the fragment and is followed by the clarification that "it is merely an ad for mobile phones" (Tokarczuk, 2017: 226). The word 'merely' emphasizes that movement can be found anywhere, even in an advertisement. Interestingly enough, the narrator finds this ad at an airport, where journeys and flights take place and people move from one destination to another one. Besides, in the following section, Annushka finds a newspaper, skims through it, and the phrase "mobility becoming reality" (ibid. 251) appears again written on the page. Through the repetition of this expression and the choice of the word 'mobility', these two narratives can be linked by the same theme. It should be mentioned the difference in the selection of verbs from 'mobility *is* [emphasis added] reality' (ibid. 226) to 'mobility *becoming* [emphasis added] reality' (ibid. 251). There is a movement from the verb 'to be', which designates some unchanging state in present tense, to the progressive form of 'to become', which entails a process of change and movement. Thus the modification in terms of verb and form involves movement and transformation. The former represents the main theme of the novel and this short story and the latter corresponds to complete changes in Annushka and other characters of *Flights*. The following section "What the shrouded runaway was saying" is told from the point of view of the religious



wanderer from "Flights" called Galina, who believes that moving is the only way in which you can be safe because constant motion prevents the triumph of evil. Her actual words are an important means of revealing information about her beliefs. Although she seems to be shouting out curses, her monologue provides the most powerful voice of the novel. Galina expresses that "Whoever pauses will be petrified; whoever stops, pinned like an insect, his heart pierced by a wooden needle, his hands and feet drilled through and pinned into the threshold and the ceiling" (Tokarczuk, 2017: 260). Her words, which take three pages long, show the contrast and the interplay between movement and stillness, and sum up the idea of perpetual fleeing and life in constant motion. This excerpt begins with the use of an implicit simile, in which people are being compared to insects. Readers may infer that certain characteristics of these small creatures such as their fragility and size, and the fact that they can be easily attracted, controlled and killed by a powerful figure can be attributed to human beings. Also, this simile may help readers visualize the consequences of being still, which are foregrounded with the last words "pinned into the threshold" (ibid. 260) suggesting that individuals who stop will be controlled and displayed by more dominant entities as if they were on an exhibition or 'cabinet of curiosities' (Tokarczuk, 2017), as mentioned in other parts of the novel. Moreover, readers may find an intertextual connection between this passage about petrification and Greek mythology. This is an instance of implied intertextuality since the allusion is not explicit. Readers may bring to the interaction with the text background knowledge about stories concerning the gods, heroes, and rituals of the ancient Greeks, which leads to a much richer experience and invites new interpretations. A link can be drawn between her words and one of the Gorgons named Medusa. She was one of the three monstrous sisters who had a petrifying gaze and serpentine hair, and turned to stone anyone who looked at her. Medusa was beheaded by Perseus, who afterwards used her head as a weapon to turn his enemies into stone until he gave it to the goddess Athena to place the head on her shield (Roman and Roman, 2010). Both stories share the same theme and involve the figure of a powerful entity that controls, paralyzes and petrifies. Finally, to continue reinforcing the same idea of movement, it should be noted that this monologue opens up with the words: "Sway, go on, move" (Tokarczuk, 2017: 258) and ends with "Move, get going" (ibid. 260). This is an example of a circular or cyclical narrative structure. The last lines provide closure and take the reader back to the beginning of the monologue. The beginning and the ending mirror each other and become two halves of the same whole. The intention of this repetition and cyclical structure may be to highlight again the concept of movement. It can be said that the three sections are connected mainly through the idea of movement.

Last in order but not of importance, a number of enigmatic images are loaded into this novel, which have been taken from the *Agile Rabbit Book of Historical and Curious Maps* (2005). There are drawings and maps, and most of them contain abstract patterns and geometrical lines that resemble the human nervous system. This narrative "Flights" is punctuated by an old map of Russia, which is spread out on two pages and has a round shape with some angels at the top. It should be pointed out that the author does not provide

any explicit explanation of this image; hence, actual readers, as opposed to implied readers, may discover the indeterminate meaning and fill in this gap of indeterminacy using their imagination and drawing on the hints provided by the written part of the story. Hence, readers may find several associations between the photograph of the map and the story itself. The image appears just after the narration of Annushka's journey through the different metro lines: Koltsevaya, Sokolnicheskaya, and Kaluzhsko-Rizhskaya. One possible interpretation could be to relate the map with Koltsevaya line, which has a circle route orbiting around central Moscow. This route follows a path approximating a circle like the shape of the map. Also, this map resembles the city of Moscow, which has developed in circles around the original historic centre and is divided into four rings. The purpose of this image may be to emphasize the journey of the main character so that readers can imagine the route she follows and understand how she moves from one end of the city to the other one, foregrounding her life in constant motion. Finally, this round picture together with the angels at the top bear a resemblance to the interior dome of a church, a very significant place for the character in the story.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

To conclude, it can be said that although the English title of the novel *Flights* carries more connotations for an English speaker than the Polish title *Bieguni*, which refers directly to a Russian orthodox sect from the eighteenth century, both names evoke the theme of movement. Characters in the novel move both in a physical and mental sense as well as readers, who move backwards and forwards during the reading of the novel. As readers jump from one genre to another one, from one character to another one and from one story to another one, they may get the impression that all the sections that constitute this literary work do not connect; however, after reading the whole novel, they may realize that they are closely linked through visible and invisible threads. Cohesion becomes an essential part of this novel because through different cohesive devices such as the simple repetition of a content word, the use of synonyms or near-synonyms, and the omission of elements that are retrievable in the given context, all the sections are implicitly and explicitly bound together and cross-linked. By trying to establish relations between all the fragments and creating a sense of wholeness, readers are organizing and reorganizing the information, and adjusting and revising their expectations. Therefore, reading is an active and dynamic process involving a number of actions on the part of readers. All in all, it can be said that readers become prosumers of this literary work since they consume and produce meaning.

It should be mentioned that some of the themes and formal techniques of the novel are present at a minor scale in this short story. As regards figures of speech, lexis and grammar, both the novel *Flights* and the short story "Flights" share the same characteristics. A number of metaphors, similes and personification

can be located with the intention of emphasizing, clarifying or embellishing the texts. Several adjectives, adverbs and verbs belonging to the field of movement help descriptions become more vivid, detailed and clear and allow readers to use their senses and imagination to comprehend and interpret the novel. Also, it is narrated mainly in the simple present, the tense chosen for the short story as well. Another characteristic that accounts for this story as a representation of the whole novel has to do with intertextuality. Readers may find several instances of intertextual connections during the reading of the novel. Some of them are explicit such as references to Cerberus or the Last Judgment that occur in the short story whereas others are implicit like the connection between the shrouded woman's speech and Medusa, one of the Gorgons. In addition, ambiguity and uncertainty become two predominant themes in the novel and also occur in "Flights" because, for instance, readers do not know whether Annushka will finally enter her apartment or go back to a life in motion. Finally, a dark and gloomy atmosphere prevails in many parts of the novel.

The reading experience of "Flights" can be divided into two moments. A first reading is connected with the main events of the story and the elements of fiction. Annushka and the shrouded woman play very important roles. The story is set in Moscow during December and a gloomy and disturbing atmosphere can be sensed from the very beginning. The narrator is third-person omniscient with some shifts from third-person to first-person narrator. Finally, the main themes centre on mobility and fluidity. A second reading implies new realizations and produces a different impression as readers are looking at the piece of literature through a different perspective; hence, they may notice elements that they have not seen before. For instance, readers may consider this story as criticism towards consumerism and the evil the shrouded woman wants to escape from could represent the capitalist world. Besides, through different techniques, the author of the novel places special emphasis on the idea of motion, which forces readers to think about her hidden intentions behind this dominant theme. Hence, they may infer that Olga Tokarczuk is mirroring our society. Constant movement distinguishes our present world and change is always happening since it is inevitable and constant. Society and individuals do not remain the same because life is a movement in itself. In general, people are constantly changing jobs, changing relationships and travelling to work, to cities and to countries. Even if our body does not move, our mind does because our thoughts come and go all the time. It can be concluded that the wanderers or *bieguni* stand for the modern man.

During the process of reading, readers may establish connections between "Flights" and other genres existing in the novel such as a personal memoir, a slogan and a monologue. The personal memoir constitutes the first piece of the novel and serves several purposes. It creates a dark and gloomy atmosphere that is repeated in the following sections, especially in the short story, and foreshadows that characters will die and/or disappear. Also, "Flights" can be linked with its previous section, a slogan on mobility, since they both share the theme of movement and can also be associated with the monologue found in the following section

because this piece expands on the words of the shrouded woman, highlighting the importance of being in motion.

The present paper provides a good starting point for discussion and further research on reader-response theories. Given the richness and complexity of the whole novel, this small-scale study has only attempted to explore the reading process and the role of the reader in one of the sections. Therefore, an exploration of other pieces of this literary work may constitute the object of future studies. Besides, the discussion of the findings with colleagues could be the first step in a process which may generate different alternative interpretations of the texts. These alternatives should, in turn, be elaborated upon so that new hypotheses may arise. Hence, this paper should not be viewed as a final result but, as everything we write, a work in progress.

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## APPENDIX

### HERE I AM

I'm a few years old. I'm sitting on the window sill, surrounded by strewn toys and toppled-over block towers and dolls with bulging eyes. It's dark in the house, and the air in the rooms slowly cools, dims. There's no one else here; they've left, they're gone, though you can still hear their voices dying down, that shuffling, the echoes of their footsteps, some distant laughter. Out the window the courtyard is empty. Darkness spreads softly from the sky, settling on everything like black dew.

The worst part is the stillness, visible, dense – a chilly dusk and the sodium-vapour lamps' frail light already mired in darkness just a few feet from its source.

Nothing happens – the march of darkness halts at the door to the house, and all the clamour of fading falls silent, makes a thick skin like on hot milk cooling. The contours of the buildings against the backdrop of the sky stretch out into infinity, slowly lose their sharp angles, corners, edges. The dimming light takes the air with it – there's nothing left to breathe. Now the dark soaks into my skin. Sounds have curled up inside themselves, withdrawn their snail's eyes; the orchestra of the world has departed, vanishing into the park.

That evening is the limit of the world, and I've just happened upon it, by accident, while playing, not in search of anything. I've discovered it because I was left unsupervised for a bit. I've clearly found myself in a trap now, and I can't get out. I'm a few years old, I'm sitting on the window sill, and I'm looking out onto the chilled courtyard. The lights in the school's kitchen are extinguished;

everyone has left. All the doors are closed, hatches down, blinds lowered. I'd like to leave, but there's nowhere to go. My own presence is the only thing with a distinct outline now, an outline that quivers and undulates, and in so doing, hurts. And all of a sudden I know: there's nothing anyone can do now, here I am.

### MOBILITY IS REALITY

At the airport, a big ad on a glass wall all-knowingly asserts:

МОБИЛЬНОСТЬ СТАНОВИТСЯ РЕАЛЬНОСТЬЮ.

Mobility is reality.

Let us stress that it is merely an ad for mobile phones

### FLIGHTS

Over the world at night hell rises. The first thing that happens is it disfigures space; it makes everything more cramped and more massive and unscaleable. Details disappear and objects lose their features, becoming squat and indistinct; how strange that by day they may be spoken of as 'beautiful' or 'useful'; now they look like shapeless bodies: hard to guess what they'd be for. Everything is hypothetical in hell. All that daytime heterogeneity of form, the presence of colours, shades, reveals itself to be utterly in vain – what purpose could possibly be served by beige upholstery, by floral wallpaper, by tassels? What difference does green make to a dress slung over the back of a chair? It's difficult to understand the covetous gaze that fell upon it as it clung to its hanger in the shop window. There are no buttons or hooks or clasps now; fingers in the dark find only vague bulges, rough patches, lumps of hard matter. The next thing hell does is drag you out of sleep. You can kick and scream; hell is implacable. Sometimes it provides disturbing images, frightening or mocking – a decapitated head, a beloved body covered in blood, human bones in ashes – yes, yes, hell likes to shock. But more often than not it awakes without standing on ceremony – your eyes open onto darkness, launching a stream of consciousness; your gaze, aimed at nothing, is its advance guard. The nocturnal brain is a Penelope unravelling the cloth of meaning diligently woven during the day. Sometimes it's a single thread, sometimes more; complex designs break down into prime factors – warp and weft; weft falls by the wayside, and only straight parallel lines remain, the barcode of the world.

Then you realize: night gives the world back its natural, original appearance, without sugar-coating it; day is a flight of fancy, light a slight exception, an oversight, a disruption of the order. The world in fact is dark, almost black. Motionless and cold.

...

She sits straight up in their bed, tickled by beads of sweat between her breasts. Her nightgown sticks to her body like skin about to be shed. She strains to hear in the darkness and catches the quiet whimpering that comes from Petya's room. For a moment she tries with her feet to find her slippers, but then she gives up. She'll run barefoot to her son. Beside her she sees the murky outline of a person as it budes and sighs.

'What?' murmurs the man, still asleep, falling back into his pillow.

'Nothing. Petya.'

She turns on a little lamp in the child's room and right away sees his eyes. They're wide open, looking at her from inside the painstaking black cavities the light carves into his face. She puts her hand to his forehead, instinctively, as always. His forehead isn't hot, but it is sweaty, clammy to the touch. Carefully she pulls the boy up into a sitting position and massages his back. Her son's head falls onto her shoulder; Annushka can smell his sweat, recognizing pain in it, a thing she's learned to do: Petya smells different when he is in pain.

'Can you make it till morning?' she whispers, softly, but then she quickly realizes what a stupid question it is. Why should he suffer until morning? She reaches for the pills on the nightstand, pops one out and puts it in his mouth. Then a glass of warmish water. The boy drinks, chokes, so a little while later she gives him another sip, with greater caution. The pill will take effect any minute now, so she lays his limp body on its right side, tucking his knees up under his belly, thinking he'll be most comfortable this way. She lies down

beside him on the edge of the bed and rests her head against his bony back, listening to the air turn into breath as it enters his lungs and is released into the night. She waits until this process becomes rhythmic, easy, automatic, and then she rises, gingerly, and tiptoes back to bed. She'd rather sleep in Petya's room, as she had until her husband had come back. That had been better, her mind had been easier, falling asleep and waking up facing her child. Not folding out that double bed each evening: let it be deserted. But a husband is a husband.

He'd come back four months earlier, after two years away. He'd come back in civilian clothes, the same ones he'd been wearing when he'd left, now out of fashion, though you could tell they'd barely been worn. She'd smelled them – they hadn't smelled like anything, maybe very slightly of damp, that smell of stillness, a shut-up storehouse.

He'd come back different – she'd noticed right away – and so far, he'd stayed different. That first night she'd made an inspection of his body – it was also different, harder, bigger, more muscular, but oddly weak.

She'd felt the scar on his shoulder and his scalp, his hair obviously getting thinner and grey. His hands had become massive, his fingers thicker, as though from physical labour. She had laid them on her bare breasts, but they'd remained uncertain. She'd tried her own hand at persuading him, but he'd continued to lie there so quietly, breathing so shallowly, that it had made her feel ashamed.

At night he'd wake up with a kind of hoarse, furious groan, sit up in the dark, and then a moment later get up and go over to the spirits shelf and pour himself a shot. Then his breath would smell like fruit, like apples. And then he'd say, 'Put your hands on me, touch me.'

'Tell me what it was like there, you'll feel better, tell me,' she said, whispering into his ear, tempting with her hot breath.

But he didn't tell her anything.

While she would deal with Petya, he would walk the apartment in his striped pyjamas, drinking strong black coffee, looking out the window onto the apartment blocks. Then he'd look in on the boy, crouching down beside him sometimes, trying to make contact. And then he'd turn on the TV and draw the yellow curtains, making the daylight sickly, dense and fevered. He didn't get dressed until around noon, when Petya's nurse was about to come, and even then he didn't always. Sometimes he'd just close the door. The sound of the TV would grow fainter, become a rankling rumbling, a summons to a newly senseless world.

The money came in like clockwork, every month. And in fact it was enough – plenty for Petya's medications, for a better, barely used wheelchair, for a nurse.

Today Annushka will not be dealing with the boy, she has today off. Her mother-in-law will be here soon, though she doesn't know which of them she's really coming to watch, her son or her grandson, which of them she'll fuss the most over. She'll lay her plaid plastic bag down by the door and extract from it her nylon housecoat and her slippers – her home uniform. She'll look in on her son, ask him a question, and he'll respond, without taking his eyes off the TV: yes or no. Nothing else, no point waiting, so she'll go to her grandson. He needs to be washed and fed; his sheets, drenched in sweat and urine, need to be changed; he needs his medications. Then the laundry needs to be put in, and their lunch needs to be made.

Then she'll spend time with the child; if the weather's nice, the boy can be taken out onto the balcony, not that there is much to see from there – just apartment blocks like great grey coral reefs in a dried-up ocean, populated by industrious organisms, their ocean bed the hazy horizon of the gigantic metropolis, Moscow. But the boy always looks up at the sky, hovering over the underbellies of the clouds, following them for a while, until they drift out of view.

Annushka is grateful to her mother-in-law for this one day a week. As she heads out the door she gives her a quick kiss on her soft, velvety cheek. That's all the time they spend together, always at the door, and then she'll rush down the stairs, feeling lighter and lighter the further she descends. She has the whole day ahead of her. Not that she will spend it on herself, of course. She has many things to take care of. She'll pay the bills, go grocery shopping, pick up Petya's prescriptions, visit the cemetery, and then finally she'll go all the way to the other end of this inhuman city so she can sit in the encroaching darkness and burst into tears. Everything takes

forever because there are traffic jams everywhere, and crushed between people she watches through the windowpanes of the bus as the gigantic cars with tinted windows glide effortlessly ahead, invested with some diabolical power, while the rest of them are at a standstill. She looks out at the squares filled with young people, at the mobile bazaars selling cheap Chinese goods. She always transfers at Kievsky Station, where she passes by all sorts of people as they make their way up and out from the underground platforms. But there is no one who attracts her attention, no one who terrifies her like this bizarre figure standing by the exit, against a backdrop of makeshift fences concealing the dug-up foundations of some construction under way, fences pasted over so densely with advertisements that they seem to be screaming.

That woman's orbit is the strip of untamed land between the wall and the just-lain pavement blocks; in this way she bears witness to the uninterrupted procession of people, receives that parade of tired and hurrying pedestrians whom she tends to catch still in the middle of their journeys from work to home or vice versa – now they'll switch their modes of transport, change from metro to bus.

She's dressed differently from all of them – she's wearing a plethora of things: trousers, and over them several skirts, but arranged so that each sticks out from below the next, in layers; and the same on top – multiple shirts, sheepskins, vests. And over everything a grey quilted drill coat, the height of refined simplicity, an echo of a distant eastern monastery or a labour camp. Combined these layers makes some aesthetic sense, and Annushka even likes it; it strikes her that the colours have been carefully selected, though it isn't clear if the selection is a human one or rather the haute couture of entropy – fading colours, fraying and falling apart.

But the strangest thing is the woman's head – tightly wrapped in a scrap of material, pressed together by a warm hat with ear flaps – and her hidden face; all you can see is her mouth as it emits a ceaseless stream of curses. The sight of this is so upsetting that Annushka never tries to understand the meanings these curses might contain. And now, too, as she passes by her, Annushka speeds up, fearful that this woman might latch onto her. That in the rush of those furious words, Annushka might even hear her own name.

It's pleasant December weather, the pavements are dry, cleared of snow, and her shoes are comfortable. Annushka doesn't get on the bus, instead crossing the bridge and then promenading along the multi-lane highway, feeling like she's walking down the shore of an immense river with no bridges. She enjoys this promenade, won't cry until she gets to her church, in the dark corner where she always kneels and remains in that uncomfortable position until she's lost sensation in her legs, until she's attained the stage that comes after the stiffening and shooting pains – the stage of nothingness. But now she throws her purse over her shoulder and holds on tightly to the plastic bag that holds the plastic flowers for the cemetery. She tries not to think about anything, and least of all about the place she's come from. She's approaching the most elegant neighbourhood of the city, so there are things for her to look at – it's full of shops here, where smooth, slender mannequins indifferently exhibit the most expensive clothing. Annushka pauses to look at a purse sewn from a million beads, embellished with tulle and lace: a kind of miracle. Finally she reaches the specialized pharmacy, where she will have to wait. But she'll receive the necessary medications. Futile medications, which only barely relieve her son's symptoms.

At a covered stand she buys a bag of pirozhki and eats them sitting on a bench in the square.

In her little church she finds a lot of tourists. The young priest who normally bustles around the sanctuary like a merchant amidst his wares is busy now, telling the tourists about the history of the building and about iconostasis. In a singsong voice he recites his teachings, the head on his slim, tall body looming over the little crowd, his pretty light beard like an extraordinary halo that's slipped off his head and slid down to his breast. Annushka backs out: how could she possibly pray and cry in the company of all these tourists? She waits and waits, but then the next group comes in, and so Annushka decides to find another site for her tears – a little further on there is another church, small and old, more often than not closed. She once went in but didn't like it – she'd been repulsed by the chill and the scent of damp wood.

But now she isn't picky, she has to find a place where she can finally cry, a secluded place, but not empty; it has to have the palpable presence of something larger than her, of big outstretched arms trembling with life. Annushka also needs to feel someone's gaze on



her, to feel that her crying is witnessed by someone, to feel it isn't just addressing a void. It can be eyes painted on wood, always open, eyes that never tire of anything, eternally calm: let those eyes watch her, unblinking.

She takes three candles and drops a few coins in the tin. The first is for Petya, the second for her reticent husband, the third for her mother-in-law in her non-iron housecoat. She lights them from the other few that burn here and looks around and finds a spot for herself on the right side, in a dark corner, so as not to bother the old women who are praying. She crosses herself sweepingly, commencing in this way the ritual of her tears.

But when she raises her eyes to pray, another face emerges from the gloom – the vast face of the gloomy icon. It's a piece of square board hung high, almost right under the dome of the church, and on it the simple features of Christ, painted in shades of brown and grey. The face is dark, against a dark background, with no halo, no crown; only the eyes glow as they stare straight into her, just like she'd wanted. And yet, it wasn't this type of gaze Annushka had been thinking of – she'd expected gentle eyes filled with love. This gaze, hypnotic, paralyzes her. Under it, Annushka's body shrinks. He was here just for a moment, floats down from the ceiling from afar, from deepest darkness – that's God's place, his hiding spot. He has no need of a body, just the face she must confront now. It's a penetrating gaze, driving painfully into her head, as though with a screwdriver. Drilling a hole into her brain. It might as well be the face not of the saviour, but rather of a drowned man who didn't die, shielding himself against omnipresent death under the water instead, who now, due to mysterious currents, has floated up under the surface, conscious, highly aware, saying: look, here I am. But she doesn't want to look at him. Annushka lowers her eyes, she doesn't want to know – that God is weak and has lost, that he's been exiled and that he is creeping around the rubbish heaps of the world, in its fetid depths. There's no sense in crying. This is not the place for tears. This God won't help, or support, or encourage, or purify, or save. The gaze of the drowned man bores into her forehead, she hears a murmur, an underground thunder off in the distance, a vibration below the church's floor.

It must be because she barely slept last night, because she's barely eaten anything today – now she feels faint. The tears won't flow, dry beds where they're supposed to be.

She jumps up and walks out. Stiffly, straight to the metro.

It feels like she has had an experience of some kind, that something's got into her, making her tense on the inside like a string on a musical instrument, causing her to make a clean sound, inaudible to anyone. A quiet sound, meant just for her body – a short-lived concert in a brittle acoustical shell. She still listens for it anyway, all her attention turned inward, but in her ears there is only the rush of her own blood.

The stairs go down, and she has the impression that it lasts forever, some people going down, others up. Ordinarily her gaze slips over others' faces, but now Annushka's eyes, struck by that sight in the church, can't manage. Her gaze alights on each and every passerby – and every face is like a slap, hard, stinging. Soon she won't be able to bear it anymore, she'll have to cover her eyes like that crazy woman in front of the station, and just like her she'll begin to shout out curses.

'Have mercy, have mercy,' she whispers and sinks her fingers into the handrail, which moves faster than the stairs; if Annushka doesn't let go she'll fall.

She sees the silent swarm of people going up and down, shoulder to shoulder, packed in. They glide toward their spots as though on tethers, heading somewhere in the suburbs, to a tenth floor, where they can pull the covers over their heads and fall into a sleep made up of scraps of day and night. And in reality in the morning that sleep does not dissolve – those scraps form collages, splotches; some configurations are clever, you could almost say premeditated.

She sees the brittleness of arms, the fragility of eyelids, the unstable line of people's lips, readily contorting into grimace; she sees how weak their hands are, how weak their legs – they will not, cannot, carry them to any destination. She sees their hearts, how they beat in time, some faster, some slower, an ordinary mechanical movement, the lungs' sacs are like dirty plastic bags, you can hear the rustle of exhalations. Their clothes have become transparent, so she watches them wed entropy. Our bodies are poor, dirty, grist – without exception – for the mill.

The escalators take these beings all straight down into the depths, into the abyss, here are the eyes of the cerberis in the glass booths at the bottom of the stairs, here the fraudulent marble and columns, massive sculptures of demons – some with sickles, others with sheaves of grain. Massive legs like the columns, giants' shoulders. Tractors – infernal machines towing sharp-toothed instruments of torture that deal the earth never-healing wounds. From all sides cramped groups of people, their hands raised pleadingly in panic, their mouths open to scream. The Last Judgement takes place here, in the depths of the metro, lit by crystal chandeliers that cast dead yellow light. The judges are nowhere to be seen, it's true, but everywhere you feel their presence. Annushka wants to retreat, run up against the current, but the escalators won't permit her to, she has to keep going down, she won't be spared. The mouths of the underground trains will open before her with a hiss and suck her into their gloomy tunnels. But of course the abyss is everywhere, even on the upper floors of the city, even on the tenth and sixteenth floors of the high-rise buildings, at the tops of spires, on the tips of antennas. There is no escape from it. Wasn't it maybe this the madwoman was screaming about, in between her curses?

Annushka staggers, leans against a wall. It imprints her wool twill coat with white traces, anointing her.

She has to get off, it's dark already, she gets off slightly at random because you can't see anything out the windows of the bus, frost has already etched silvery twigs across them – but she knows the route by heart, she was right. Just a few courtyards – she takes a shortcut – and she'll be at her building. But she slows, her legs don't want to take her to her destination, they resist, her steps get smaller and smaller. Annushka stops. She looks up and sees the lights on in her apartment. They must be waiting for her – so she starts up again, but a second later she stops again. The cold wind pierces through her coat, blows apart the bottom, seizes her thighs with its icy fingers. Its touch is like razor blades, like broken glass. Tears fly down her cheeks from the cold, which suits the wind, finally providing it a way to sting her face. Annushka rushes on, towards their stairwell, but when she gets to the door she turns, puts up her collar, and as fast as she can she goes back to where she just came from.

It's only warm in the big waiting room at the Kievsky Station or in the bathroom. She stands unable to make her mind up as the patrols pass by her (they always walk with a slow, loose step, moving their legs lightly as though meandering along a seaside boulevard), she pretends to read the timetable; she doesn't even know why she's afraid, after all she's done nothing wrong. And in any case the patrols are interested in something else, unerringly singling out olive-skinned men in leather jackets and women in headscarves from the crowd.

Annushka walks out in front of the station and sees from afar that shrouded woman still scrambling, her voice hoarse from cursing – in fact, neither it nor the curses themselves are really recognizable now. Good then – after a moment's hesitation she approaches her calmly and stands in front of her. This throws the woman off for just a second – she must be able to see Annushka through the material that covers her face. Annushka takes another step closer and now stands so near she can smell the woman's breath – dust and must, old oil. The woman speaks softer and softer until she finally falls silent. Her scrambling turns into rocking, as though she can't stand still. They stand facing each other for a moment as people pass them by, but indifferently; one person just glances over at them, but they're in a hurry, their trains will leave at any moment.

'What are you saying?' asks Annushka.

The shrouded woman freezes, holds her breath, and then starts sideways, spooked, towards the passage through the construction, over the frozen mud. Annushka follows her, does not take her eyes off her, is a few steps behind her, behind her quilted coat, behind her tiny teetering wool felt boots. She will not let her get away. The woman looks over her shoulder and tries to speed up, almost running, but Annushka is young and strong. She has strong muscles – how many times has she carried both Petya and his carriage all the way down the stairs, how many times has she carried them all the way up, when the lift wasn't working.

'Hey!' Annushka shouts intermittently, but the woman gives no reaction.

They pass through the courtyards between homes, pass rubbish heaps and trodden squares. Annushka doesn't feel tired but drops the bag with flowers for the cemetery; it would be a waste of time to go back for it.

Finally the woman squats and pants, unable to catch her breath. Annushka stops a few metres behind her and waits for her to stand back up and turn to her. The woman has lost; now she has to surrender. And sure enough, she looks over her shoulder, and you can see her face, she's pulled the covering off her eyes. She has light blue irises, frightened, looking at Annushka's shoes.

'What do you want from me? Why are you chasing me?'

Annushka doesn't answer, she feels as though she's caught a big animal, a big fish, a whale, and now she doesn't know what to do with it; she doesn't need this trophy. The woman is afraid, clearly in this fear all her curses have escaped her.

'Are you from the police?'

'No,' says Annushka.

'Then what?'

'I want to know what you're saying. You've been saying something all this time, I see you every week as I go into town.'

To this the woman answers, more boldly:

'I'm not saying anything. Leave me alone.'

Annushka leans over and extends her hand to help her stand, but her hand changes course and caresses the woman's cheek. It is warm, nice, soft.

'I didn't want anything bad.'

At first the woman freezes, astonished by this touch, but then, seemingly mollified by Annushka's gesture, she scrabbles and gets up.

'I'm hungry,' she says. 'Let's go, there's a kiosk right here, they have cheap hot sandwiches, you can buy me something to eat.'

They walk silently, side by side. At the booth Annushka buys two long rolls with cheese and tomatoes, watching to make sure the woman doesn't run away. She can't eat anything. She holds her roll out in front of her like a flute about to play a winter melody. They sit on a wall. The woman eats her roll, and then wordlessly she takes Annushka's. She is old, older than Annushka's mother-in-law. Her cheeks are broken up by wrinkles that run diagonally from her forehead to her chin. It's hard for her to eat because she's lost her teeth. The tomato slices slip off of the bread, she grasps at them, saves them at the last minute and carefully puts them back in place. She tears off big bites with just her lips.

'I can't go home,' Annushka says suddenly and looks down at her feet. She's stunned she said something like this, and only now does she think in terror what it means. The woman murmurs something indistinct in response, but after swallowing her bite, she asks:

'Do you have an address?'

'Yes,' says Annushka, and she recites it: 'Kuznetskaya 46, apartment 78.'

'So just forget it,' blurts the woman, with her mouth full.

Vorkuta. She was born there in the late sixties, when the apartment blocks, which now seem age-old, were just going up. She remembers them as new – rough plaster, the smell of concrete and the asbestos used as insulation. The promising smoothness of the PVC tiles. But in a cold climate everything gets older faster, the frost breaks down the consistent structure of the walls, slows electrons in their ceaseless circulation.

She remembers the blinding whiteness of winters. The whiteness and the sharp edges of the light in exile. Such whiteness exists only in order to create a framework for the darkness, of which there is decidedly more.

Her father worked at a massive heating plant, and her mother in a cafeteria, which is how they got by – she always brought something home for them to eat. Now Annushka thinks that everybody there had a kind of weird illness, hidden deep inside the body, under clothing, a great sadness, or perhaps something vaster than sadness, but she can't think of the right word.

They lived on the seventh floor of an eight-floor building, one of many identical buildings, but with time, as she grew up, the upper floors emptied out, people moved away to more amenable locales, usually to Moscow, but anywhere, as far away from there as possible. Those who stayed moved downwards, took up residence in the lowest-level apartments they could, where it was warmer, closer to people, to the earth. Living on the eighth floor during the many months of polar winter was like hanging from the concrete

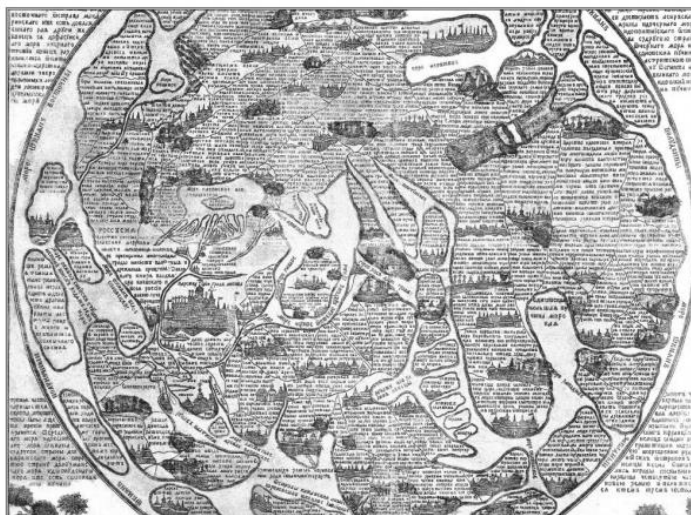
vaults of the world in a frozen drop of water, right in the middle of a frozen hell. When she'd last visited her sister and mother, they lived on the ground floor. Her father had died long ago.

It was fortunate that Annushka got into a good teaching school in Moscow; unfortunate she didn't finish the course. If she had, she would be a teacher now, and perhaps she would never have met the man who had become her husband. Their genes would never have blended together in that toxic mix that was to blame for Petya coming into the world suffering from a disease that had no cure. Many times Annushka had tried to barter with anyone she could, with God, with the Virgin, with Saint Parascheva, with the whole iconostasis, even with the closer, vaguer realm of fate. Take me instead of Petya, I'll take his illness, I'll die, just let him recover. She didn't stop there – she threw in others' lives: that of her reluctant husband (let him get shot) and of her mother-in-law (let her have a stroke). But of course, there was never any answer to her offer.

She buys a ticket and goes downstairs. There is still a crowd, people returning from the city centre to their beds, to sleep. Some already falling asleep in their carriages. Their sleepy breaths fog up the glass; you could draw something in those with your finger, anything, it wouldn't matter because regardless it would vanish a moment later. Annushka gets to the final station, Yugo-Zapadnaya, gets off and stands on the platform, only to realize a moment later that the train will go back, the same train. She sits back down in the same seat and from there returns, and then comes back again, until after several rides like this she switches to the Koltsevaya line. This line takes her in a circle, until around midnight she reaches Kievsky Station as though coming home. She sits on the platform until a menacing lady comes along, insisting that she leave, saying they're about to close the metro. Annushka leaves, although she doesn't want to – outside the frost is biting – but then she finds a small pub near the station, with a television up by the ceiling; the tables are peopled by a few lost travellers. She orders tea with lemon, one after another; then borscht, terrible, watery, and with her head propped up against her hand she drifts off briefly. She is happy, because she doesn't have a single thought in her head, a single care, a single expectation or hope. It's a good feeling.

The first train is still empty. Then at each station more and more people get on, until finally the crush is such that Annushka stands squashed between the backs of some kind of giants. Since she can't reach the handles she's condemned to having anonymous bodies hold her up. Then suddenly the throng thins out, and at the next station the train is empty. Only a couple of people remain. Now Annushka learns that some people don't get off at the end stations. She alone gets off and switches trains. But she sees the others through the windows finding themselves spots at the ends of their carriages and setting out around their feet their plastic bags or their backpacks, usually old, made of hemp. They doze off with their eyes half-shut or unwrap the paper off some food and, excusing themselves over and over, mumbling, chewing reverentially.

She changes trains because she's scared someone might spot her, might grab her by the arm and shake her or – worst of all – might lock her up somewhere. Sometimes she walks over to the other side of the platform, and sometimes she changes platforms; then she travels by escalator, by tunnel, but never reading any of the signs, completely free. She goes, for example, to Chistye Prudy, changes from Sokolnicheskaya to Kaluzhsko-Rizhskaya and goes to Medvedkovo and then back to the other side of the city. She stops in the toilets to check her appearance, to make sure she looks all right, not because she feels the need to (in truth she does not), but rather to avoid being spotted, due to unkemptness, by one of those cerberi that guard the escalators in their glass booths. She suspects that they have mastered the art of sleeping with their eyes open. At a kiosk she buys some pads, some soap, the cheapest toothpaste and toothbrush. She sleeps through the afternoon, on the Koltsevaya line. In the evening she emerges from the station by way of the stairs, so as to maybe meet the shrouded woman out front – but no, she isn't there. It's cold, even colder than the day before, so she's relieved to be going back underground.



The next day the shrouded woman is back, swaying on stiff legs and shouting out curses that sound like gibberish. Annushka stands in her line of vision, on the other side of the passageway, but the woman evidently does not see her, lost in her lamentations. Finally Annushka, taking advantage of a momentary lapse in the crowds, goes and stands right in front of her.

'Let's go, I'll buy you a roll.'

The woman stops, snapped out of her trance, rubs her gloved hands together, stamps her feet like a saleswoman at a bazaar who is frozen to the bone. They go up to the kiosk together. Annushka is truly happy to see her.

'What's your name?' she asks.

The woman, busy with her roll, merely shrugs. But a moment later she says with her mouth full:

'Galina.'

'I'm Annushka.'

That's it for conversation. Finally, when the frost drives her back towards the station, Annushka asks another question:

'Galina, where do you sleep?'

The shrouded woman tells her to come back to the kiosk when the metro closes.

All evening Annushka rides the same line and indifferently examines her own face reflected in the window against the dark walls of the underground tunnels. She already recognizes at least two people. She wouldn't dare try to talk to them. She's travelled a few stops now with one of them – there is a tall, thin man, not old, perhaps even young, it's hard to say. His face is covered in a sparse light-coloured beard that comes down to his chest. He's wearing a flat cloth cap, a worker's cap, ordinary and threadbare, a long grey overcoat, pockets stuffed with something, and a weathered backpack. Then tall lace-up boots with homemade socks protruding out of them, the legs of his brown trousers tightly tucked in. He seems to not be paying attention to anything, immersed in his own thoughts. With verve he hops out onto the platform, giving the impression that he's heading for some distant but concrete destination. Annushka has also seen him twice from the platform; once he was sleeping on some completely deserted train that seemed to be retiring for the night; the other time he was also dozing, resting his forehead against the glass; his breath conjured up a mist that concealed half his face.

The other one Annushka remembers is an old man. He walks with difficulty, with a cane, or rather, a walking stick, a thick piece of wood that curves a little at the end. When he gets into a carriage he has to hang on to the door with his other hand, and usually somebody helps him then. Once inside people give up their seats for him, reluctantly, but they do it. He looks like a beggar. Him Annushka does try to hunt down, as she hunted down the shrouded woman earlier. But all she manages to do is ride with him for some time in the same carriage, stand in front of him for more or less half an hour, so that she knows by heart every detail of his face, his clothing. She isn't brave enough to talk to him, however. The man keeps his head down, not paying attention to what's

happening around him. Then a crowd of people going home from work sweeps her away. She lets herself be carried by this warm stream of scents and touches. She becomes free of it only after it has carried her through the turnstiles, as though the underground had spit her out like some foreign body. Now she will have to buy a ticket to go back in, and she knows that she will run out of money soon enough.

Why does she remember those two? I suspect because they're constant, somehow, as though they moved differently, more slowly. Everyone else is like a river, a current, water that flows from here to there, creating eddies and waves, but each particular form, being fleeting, disappears, and the river forgets about them. But those two move against the current, which is why they stand out the way they do. And why they aren't bound by the river's rules. I think that this is what attracts Annushka.

When they close the metro she waits in front of the side entrance for the shrouded woman and just when she gives up, the woman finally appears. Her eyes are covered, and with all those layers of clothing her shape is that of a barrel. She tells Annushka to follow her, and Annushka obeys. She is very tired, to be frank, has no energy at all and would be thrilled to just sit down somewhere, anywhere. They walk along the bridge of boards over the excavation, passing tin fencing pasted over with posters, and then they go down into an underground passageway. For a while they walk down a narrow corridor, where it is pleasingly warm. The woman indicates a place for Annushka on the floor, and Annushka lies down without getting undressed and immediately falls asleep. As she's dozing, just as she has always wanted – deeply, without a thought in her head – the image she just saw walking down the cramped corridor returns for a moment under her eyelids.

A dark room, and in it an open door that leads into another room, bright. Here there is a table, and people sitting around it. Their hands are arranged on the tabletop, and they are sitting up straight. They sit and look at each other in absolute silence and without moving. She could swear that one of those people is the man in the worker's cap.

Annushka sleeps soundly. Nothing wakes her, no rustling, no creaking of the bed, no TV. She sleeps as though she were a piece of rock against which stubborn waves are crashing, or a tree that has fallen and is now being covered by moss and mushroom spawn. Just before waking she has a funny dream – that she's playing with a colourful toiletry bag, with a pattern of little elephants and kittens, which she's turning over in her hands. And then suddenly she lets it go, only the bag doesn't fall, it hangs between her hands, suspended in mid-air, and Annushka finds that she can play with it without even touching it. That she can move it with the power of her will. It's a very pleasant realization, with a great joy in it that she hasn't felt for a long time, since childhood, in fact. So she wakes up in a good mood, and now sees that this is not some abandoned workers' dormitory at all, as she'd thought yesterday, but rather a common boiler room. That's why it's so warm in here. And she is sleeping on cardboard laid out alongside a pile of coal. On a piece of newspaper lies a quarter loaf of bread, quite stale, and an ample helping of lard mixed with hot pepper. She guesses this is from Galina, but she won't touch the food until she has relieved herself in the disgusting bathroom without doors, and managed to wash her hands.

Oh, how good it feels – how incredibly good – to become part of a crowd that gradually warms up. Overcoats and furs give off the smells of people's homes – grease, detergent, sweet perfumes. Annushka goes through the turnstile and from there allows herself to be carried by the first wave. The Kalininskaya line this time. She stands on the platform, then feels the warm underground air. No sooner do the doors open than Annushka finds herself inside, pressed between bodies, so much so she doesn't need to hold on. When the train curves she gives into that motion, sways like grass amidst more grass, a blade among other grains. At the next station people still get on although you really couldn't even squeeze a match in now. Annushka half-closes her eyes and feels as though her hands were being held, as though from all sides she were being embraced affectionately and rocked by reassuringly kind hands. Then suddenly they pull into a station where many people get off the train, and one must stand on one's own two feet again.

When the carriage almost completely empties out near the final station, she finds a newspaper. At first she stares at it suspiciously – maybe she's forgotten how to read – but then she picks it up and anxiously leafs through it. She reads about a model who's died of

anorexia, and how the authorities are thinking about prohibiting overly skinny girls from being displayed on the runways. She also reads about terrorists – yet another plot's been foiled. TNT and detonators found in an apartment. She reads of disoriented whales swimming up onto beaches where they die. Of the police tracking down a ring of paedophiles on the internet. Of the forecast predicting it will get colder. Of mobility becoming reality.

There's something wrong with this paper, which must be falsified somehow – which must be fake. Every sentence she reads is unbearable and hurts. Annushka's eyes fill with tears and brim over, big drops plopping onto the news. The poor-quality paper instantly absorbs them like the barely-there pages of a Bible.

When the train goes above ground Annushka rests her head against the glass and looks out. The city's every shade of ash, from dirty white through to black. Made up of rectangles and unformed masses, of squares and straight angles. She tracks high-voltage lines and cables, then looks up over the roofs and counts antennas. She shuts her eyes. When she opens them again the world has skipped from place to place. Right at dusk, revisiting the same place once again, she sees, just for a moment, just a few instants, the low sun break through from behind the white-blooming clouds to illuminate the apartment blocks with a red glow, but just their tips, the highest floors, and it looks like giant torches being set alight.

Then she sits on a bench on the platform beneath a large ad. She eats what was left from her breakfast. She washes up in the bathroom and returns to her seat. Rush hour is about to begin. Those who went one way in the morning will now go back the other way. The train that stops in front of her is well lit and almost empty. Just one person in the whole carriage – that man in the cap. He stands taut as a chord. When the train starts, it jostles him a little; then the train disappears, swallowed up by the black mouth of the underground.

'I'll buy you a roll,' Annushka says to the shrouded woman, who stops her rocking for a second, as though only able to digest a sentence if she stays still. Then after a second she sets off towards where the sandwiches are sold.

They lean against the back of the kiosk and eat, after the woman has crossed herself a dozen or so times, and bowed.

Annushka asks her about the people who were sitting in silence in the boiler room the day before, and once more she freezes, this time with a bite of the roll in her mouth. She says something unconnected, something like, 'How so?' And then she spits out spitefully, 'Get the fuck away from me, little miss.'

She leaves. Annushka rides the metro until one o'clock in the morning, and then, when it shuts down and the hellhounds chase everyone away, she circles around the place where she thought the entrance to the warm boiler room was, but she doesn't find it. So she goes to the station and there, scraping up almost all of her remaining money, she spends the night over a series of teas and borschts in small plastic cups, valiantly propped up on her elbows over the laminated tabletop.

The second she hears the grating of the bars being opened, she buys a ticket from the machine and goes downstairs. In the window of the train she sees her hair's become greasy already, that there's no trace left of her hairstyle, and that the other passengers are somewhat reluctant to sit beside her now. Periodically she panics at the fleeting thought she might run into someone, but the people she knows don't take this line; just in case she finds a place in the corner, against the wall. Come to think of it, who does Annushka even know? The postwoman, the woman from the shop downstairs, the man who lives across from them: she doesn't even know their names. She feels like covering her face like that shrouded woman, that's actually a good idea – putting a covering over your eyes to be as little visible to yourself as you can be, and to be seen as little as you can. She gets bumped into, but it only brings her pleasure, to be touched by someone. An older woman sitting near her takes an apple out of a plastic bag and offers it to her, smiling. When at the Park Kultury station she stands in front of the pirozhki kiosk a young guy with close-cropped hair buys a portion for her. She gleans from this that she must not look her best. She says thank you, and she doesn't refuse, although she still has a couple of coins left. She is witness to a number of events: the police nabbing a guy in a leather jacket. A couple arguing, voices raised as loud

as they will go, both of them drunk. A young girl, a teenager, who gets on the train at Cherkizovskaya and sobs, repeating: Mum, mum, but no one has the courage to do anything to help her, and then it's too late, the girl has got off at Komsomolskaya. She sees someone running away, a short dark man, knocking into passers-by, but he gets stuck in the crowd at the stairs and gets caught there by two other men, who pry open his hands. A woman fleetingly bemoaning having just had everything stolen, everything, but her voice arrives from an ever-greater distance, dies down and finally dies away. And twice today she sees a stiff old man with absent eyes flitting before her on the brightly lit train. She doesn't even know that it's been dark for a long time now, and that lanterns and lamps are on, seeping yellow light into the icy, thick air; today sunlight has completely escaped Annushka. She goes up to the surface at Kievskaya and heads towards the temporary passageway along the building being built in the hopes of finding the shrouded woman.

She is where she usually is, doing what she usually does – scampering in place, tracing circles of sorts and figures of eight and snarling out her same old curses, looking like a clump of dampened rags. Annushka stands in front of her for so long that the woman finally notices and stops. Then – although they've made no plans to – they both start hurriedly walking, without so much as a word, as though rushing towards some objective that will vanish for all time if they're not quick enough. At the bridge the wind hits both of them like a kind of lady boxer.

At the kiosk on the Arbat they have delicious blinis, not expensive, dripping with grease and with sour cream on top. The shrouded woman puts some coins on the little glass saucer and gets two warm servings. They find themselves a place on the wall where they can eat this treat. Annushka gazes as though hypnotized at the young people all along the benches despite the cold, playing guitar and drinking beer. Making a ruckus more than singing. Shouting over one another, mucking around. Two young girls ride up on horseback; an unusual sight indeed, the horses are tall, well-cared-for, evidently straight from the stable; one of these Amazons greets the kids with the guitar, elegantly dismounts, chatting, keeping a tight hold on the bridle. The other girl tries to talk some straggling tourists into giving her some money to feed the horse – or so she tells them – but they deduce the money is really for beer. The animal does not look like it lacks for nourishment.

The shrouded woman elbows her. 'Eat,' she says.

But Annushka cannot take her eyes off this little scene, she looks greedily at the young people with her blinis steaming in her hand. In all of them she sees her Petya, they're around the same age. Petya comes back into her body, as though she'd never given him up into the world. He's there, curled up, heavy as a stone, painful, swelling inside her, growing – it must be that she has to give birth to him again, this time out of every pore she has in her skin, sweating him out. For now he comes up in her throat, sticking in her lungs, and he won't emerge in any other way besides a sob. No, she won't be able to eat a blini – she's full. Petya's lodged in her throat, when he could have been sitting there and reaching up with a beer can in his hand, giving it to the girl with the horse, leaning into it with his whole body, bursting out laughing. He could have been in motion, could have bent down to his boots and then lifted his arms and placed his foot in the stirrup and swung his other leg over. Sat on the back of that animal, traversing the streets sitting straight up and smiling, a scraggly moustache shading his upper lip. He could have run down the stairs, storming them, after all he is the same age as these boys, and she, his mother, would have worried about him failing his chemistry class, not getting into university and winding up like his father, worried he'd have trouble finding a job, that she wouldn't like his wife, that they'd have a baby too soon. This ocean of lead gathers heavily inside her and becomes unbearable and runs into a gesture one of the girls makes, wanting to tame the impatient horse – she jerks his head down by his bridle to force him to be still. And when the horse tries to pull away she cracks a whip over his back and screams, 'Stay, goddammit! Hold still!'

And now Annushka's blinis with sour cream fall from her hand, and she has launched at the girl fighting the horse, begun attacking her blindly with her fists. 'Leave him alone!' she shrieks, her voice straining in her throat. 'Leave him alone!'

It takes a second for the startled kids to react, to try to pull off this woman in the checkered coat, suddenly deranged, but by now another woman is rushing to her aid, some shrouded lunatic all dressed in rags, and both of them are trying to take away the reins from the girl and to push her away. The girl whimpers, shielding her head with her hands – she hadn't expected this furious attack.



The horse kicks, whinnies and gets away from the girl, running down the middle of the Arbat, spooked (it's a good thing the promenade is almost empty at this hour); the clatter of his hooves echoes off the walls of the buildings and brings to mind a street fight, a strike; people's windows open. But now at the end of the street two policemen appear, walking serenely, probably talking about video games – there's nothing happening – but then they see the commotion, swing into action, grabbing their truncheons, taking off at a run.

'Sway,' says the shrouded woman. 'Move.'

They're sitting at the police station awaiting their turn for the flushed and disagreeable policeman to take down their statements.

'Sway.' And for these couple of hours she chatters in a kind of frenzy, no doubt scared. Adrenaline has awakened the shrouded woman's tongue. She whispers directly into Annushka's ear so that no one else is privy to their conversation – not the man who was robbed, not the two young dark-skinned whores, not the man with the wounded head holding a bandage in place with one hand. Meanwhile Annushka cries, tears spilling down her cheeks incessantly, though her reserves will run out soon, it's clear.

Then, when their turn comes, the red-faced policeman shouts over his shoulder to someone in the other room:

'It's that runaway woman.'

The voice from in there answers:

'That one you can just let go, but write the other one up, for disturbing the peace.'

And to the shrouded woman the policeman says:

'Next time we're going to ship you out of town, a hundred kilometres out, got it? We don't want any cult members around here.'

Meanwhile he takes Annushka's I.D. from her, and as though he couldn't read he also has her repeat her first name, patronymic and last name, and her address, he asks for her address. Annushka touches the tabletop with her fingertips and, partially closing her eyes as though reciting a poem, gives him her information. She repeats her address twice:

'Kuznetskaya 46, apartment 78.'

They release them separately, an hour apart, first the shrouded woman, so by the time Annushka gets out, there is no trace of her. Nothing surprising about that, the cold is horrendous. She meanders around the station, her legs urge her on, would carry her down these broad streets off somewhere to the source of all streets, to where they emerge from the hilly outskirts, and past them, to where new and different vistas open up – of the great plain that plays with its breath. But Annushka's bus is arriving, she runs up and gets on it just in time.

People are in motion already, the streets overtaken by morning movements even though the sun is not yet out. Annushka's on the bus for a long time, reaching the city's edge, and then she's standing at the base of her apartment block, looking up at her windows, all the way up. They're still dark, but when the sky starts to get lighter she sees that in the kitchen of her apartment there is a light that switches on, and she heads for the entrance.

#### WHAT THE SHROUDED RUNAWAY WAS SAYING

Sway, go on, move. That's the only way to get away from him. He who rules the world has no power over movement and knows that our body in motion is holy, and only then can you escape him, once you've taken off. He reigns over all that is still and frozen, everything that's passive and inert.

So go, sway, walk, run, take flight, because the second you forget and stand still his massive hands will seize you and turn you into just a puppet, you'll be enveloped in his breath, stinking of smoke and fumes and the big rubbish dumps outside town. He will turn your brightly coloured soul into a tiny flat one, cut out of paper, of newspaper, and he will threaten you with fire, disease and war, he will scare you so you lose your peace of mind and cease to sleep. He will mark you and record you in his records, provide you with the documentation of your fall. He'll occupy your thoughts with unimportant things, what to buy, and what to sell, where things are cheaper and where they're more expensive. From then on you will worry over trifles – the price of petrol and how that will affect the

payments on our loans. You will live every day in pain, as though your life were a sentence. But for what crime? Committed when and by whom? You'll never know.

Once, long ago, the Tsar tried to reform the world but he was vanquished, and the world fell right into the hands of the Antichrist. God, the real one, the good one, became an exile from the world, the vessel of divine power shattered, absorbed into the earth, disappearing into its depths. But when he spoke in a whisper from his hiding place, he was heard by one righteous man, a soldier by the name of Yefim, who paid attention to his words. In the night he threw away his rifle, took off his uniform, unwrapped his feet and slid his boots off. He stood under the sky naked, as God had made him, and then he ran into the forest, and donning an overcoat he wandered from village to village, preaching the gloomy news. Flee, get out of your homes, go, run away, for only thus will you avoid the traps of the Antichrist. Any open battle with him will be lost outright. Leave whatever you possess, give up your land and get on the road.

For anything that has a stable place in this world – every country, church, every human government, everything that has preserved a form in this hell – is at his command. Everything that is defined, that spans from here to there, that fits into a framework, is written down in registers, numbered, testified to, sworn to; everything collected, displayed, labelled. Everything that holds: houses, chairs, beds, families, earth, sowing, planting, verifying growth. Planning, awaiting the results, outlining schedules, protecting order. Rear your children thus, since you had them without understanding, and set out on the road; bury your parents, who brought you into this world without understanding – and go. Get out of here, go far away, beyond the reach of his breath, beyond his cables and wires and antennas and waves, resist the measurements of his sensitive instruments.

Whoever pauses will be petrified, whoever stops, pinned like an insect, his heart pierced by a wooden needle, his hands and feet drilled through and pinned into the threshold and the ceiling.

This is precisely how he died, Yefim, he who rebelled. He was captured and his body nailed to the cross, immobilized like an insect, on display for human and inhuman eyes, but most of all inhuman eyes, which take the most delight in all such spectacles; hardly a surprise that they repeat them every year and celebrate, praying to the corpse.

This is why tyrants of all stripes, infernal servants, have such deep-seated hatred for the nomads – this is why they persecute the Gypsies and the Jews, and why they force all free peoples to settle, assigning the addresses that serve as our sentences.

What they want is to create a frozen order, to falsify time's passage. They want for the days to repeat themselves, unchanging, they want to build a big machine where every creature will be forced to take its place and carry out false actions. Institutions and offices, stamps, newsletters, a hierarchy, and ranks, degrees, applications and rejections, passports, numbers, cards, election results, sales and amassing points, collecting, exchanging some things for others.

What they want is to pin down the world with the aid of barcodes, labelling all things, letting it be known that everything is a commodity, that this is how much it will cost you. Let this new foreign language be illegible to humans, let it be read exclusively by automatons, machines. That way by night, in their great underground shops, they can organize readings of their own barcoded poetry.

Move. Get going. Blessed is he who leaves.