

# ‘The Doctrine of Multiplicity’ in Olga Nawoja Tokarczuk’s Novel *The Books of Jacob*: A Pragmatic and Pluralistic Reading

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## Abstract

This paper approaches ‘the doctrine of multiplicity,’ by analysing history, culture, text and characters in Olga Tokarczuk’s *The Books of Jacob* through Pluralism, Pragmatism and Metamodernism. A pragmatic theory of truth holds that a proposition is true if it is useful to believe. The utility is the essential mark of truth. As the truth is like a gnarled tree, this experimental historical novel can be perceived as a whole forest of gnarled trees, haunting and irresistible. It attempts to explore the elements of multilingualism, multiculturalism, multidiscursivity, multivoicedness, a mixed multitude, multilateralism, multifacetedness, the protagonist’s multipersonality and multitextuality in Tokarczuk’s *magnum opus* of facts, fiction and fantasy. In the novel, there is a disagreement between the nationalistic and multicultural discourses reflected in the orthodox and heretic discourses. The pragmatic side of Messianism, the emancipating potential of the messianic discourse and the emancipating of individual subjectivity from community bonds centre Tokarczuk’s ‘Constellation Novel’. Contrary to the isolationism and exclusionism inherent to nationalism, as it is encountered in Poland and across the world, Tokarczuk insists on multiplicity, diversity, and connectivity. It also attempts to examine the ambivalent figure of Frank in the novel as an ideologue, pragmatist, heretic and hedonist.

**Keywords:** multiplicity, pluralism, pragmatism, metamodernism, macrohistory, microhistory, multiculturalism, multipersonality, polysemy, polyglot, Catholicism, Judaism, Frankism, messianism, heresy, hedonism, historical novel, constellation novel.

## Pragmatism, Pluralism and Metamodernism

By situating truth and reason inside the empirical flux of experience rather than outside it in some abstract, static transcendental realm, pragmatists abandoned the unhelpful quest for certainty and instead offered a reason as an instrument of adaptation and dynamic transformation of the world. "What really exists," William James held, "is not things made but things in the making" (263). Regarding truth as an encounter between subject and object, he looked to "living understanding of the movement of reality" as an

alternative. Moreover, that flux could only be seen as pluralistic rather than monistic.

Pluralism, which means "doctrine of multiplicity," is the belief that there are multiple fundamental substances or principles. Pluralism is a metaphysical view that reality is made up of many separate components. The concept that the minds and bodies of humans are made up of a variety of basic components is known as the philosophy of mind. Pluralism is the claim in epistemology that there are numerous contradictories but equally true accounts of the world, and that no single explanatory system or perspective of reality can account for all of life's experiences. Even in moral problems, ethics assumes that there are numerous separate sources of worth and that there is no single truth. In political philosophy, Pluralism is the acceptance of a multiplicity of groups with competing interests. This is closest to the concept most commonly in general conversational usage.

Pluralism is a way of looking at societal variety. It might be interpreted as a philosophical, cultural, or political position. Pluralism refers to the concept that cultures are expressions of a range of values, practises, and beliefs from a cultural or sociological standpoint. Cultural differences result in ethical variety. It's a sociological perspective on the existence of diversity in practices, beliefs, and value systems. The organisational and structural articulation of competing individual and group interests is at the heart of political pluralism. Political pluralism, like cultural pluralism, may or may not imply a philosophical perspective on the diverse nature of values and their impact on human agency. Philosophical pluralism entails more than merely acknowledging the presence of social diversity (whether political or cultural); it also ties empirical difference to a philosophical perspective on the nature of values and the knowledge, experience, and awareness we have of them. Cultural, moral, and political diversity, according to philosophical pluralism, is an unavoidable and permanent by-product of the nature of the values that make up society, our limited epistemic capacity, or the historical and political formation of human experience.

Pragmatists have long had clear beliefs about how the natural and social worlds interact. The majority of them claim that humans developed in nature as creatures who use intelligence to solve their survival difficulties. On the other side, the

evolution of intelligence must be viewed as our functioning version of survival strategies such as physical power or numerousness, rather than as a purpose of nature itself.

When viewed from a pragmatic perspective, the difficulties of realism vs antirealism, evidentialism versus fideism, and science versus religion, as well as other fundamental topics in the philosophy of religion, acquire fresh interpretations. Religion is then understood as a human practice with specific aims and goals, responding to specific human needs and interests, upholding important human values, and attempting to resolve problematic situations that naturally arise from our practises, particularly our need to live with our vulnerability, finitude, guilt, and mortality.

Metamodernism is a merger of reason and sensibility in which the self transforms; the self's journey is documented in "tellable stories" that cross established modern and postmodern divides and value interconnections. The metamodern viewpoint can be thought of as a higher-order synthesis that encompasses and surpasses both the modernist and postmodern opposing critiques of reason and science. Furthermore, metamodernism views our current state of knowledge as extremely chaotic and fragmented, advocating for a more integrated pluralism that allows for positive, constructive work on what some have dubbed a "post-postmodern grand meta-narrative." Synthesis and integration, "moving beyond" and transcending are all aspects of metamodernism. Metamodernism is broad and varied; it stresses various aspects of numerous books without becoming a moving, ephemeral concept.

### ***The Books of Jacob: An Introduction***

*The Books of Jacob* is a colossal metamodernist epic historical novel of multitudinousness and pluralism. As the subtitle signifies, the novel is a great journey through seven borders, five languages and three major religions, not counting the small ones. This insane book is nearly one thousand pages long. The wanderings, languages and religions here are truly numerous, especially since the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was a unique melting pot of faiths, nationalities and cultures. In the centre of this vast historical-literary canvas, skilfully woven from the luxurious fabric of Central European history, is the turbulent life of a charismatic Jewish heretic, mystic and adventurer, Jacob Frank, who has declared himself the Messiah. It is paginated in reverse to mimic the way Hebrew is read. There are hundreds of chapter headings, dozens of illustrations, several poems, and a map. In her magnum opus, 2018 Nobel Prize in Literature laureate Olga Tokarczuk writes the story of Jacob Frank through the perspectives of his contemporaries, capturing Enlightenment Europe on the cusp of precipitous change, searching for certainty and longing for transcendence.

The quality that makes *The Books of Jacob* so striking is its remarkable form. Tokarczuk has constructed her narrative as a collage of legends, letters, diary entries, rumours, hagiographies, political attacks and historical records. These pieces, jangling together, move forward more like a glaring of cats than a line of soldiers. The intricately designed but rough architecture of this novel leaves a series of gaps and overlaps that any intrepid historian confronts when exhuming a controversial figure mummified in mythology.

*The Books of Jacob* begins in 18th century Rohatyn, a city which is now in western Ukraine but which at the start of the novel lies under Polish rule. Rohatyn's market day draws a diverse crowd from the surrounding region, including some of the novel's key figures: a bookish Catholic priest, a strong-headed noblewoman, and a self-taught poet. They forge multiplying connections, bringing an ever-expanding cast of characters into the world of the novel, which rapidly becomes a transnational, trans-denominational, even trans-human, and trans-historical one.

The book traces the rise and fall of the Frankists more or less as one would encounter it in an archive: Tokarczuk leaps from letters to diary entries to travelogues to character sketches, sometimes giving two- or three characters' perspectives on the same event. We watch, sometimes from close up and sometimes from very far away, as Jacob brings together a cast of disciples from across the multi-ethnic landscape of Eastern Europe and leads these disciples on a flight from various persecutions. Tokarczuk revives the bygone, borderless world of the eighteenth century not to teach us something about the world of the present but to create a kind of instructive disorientation: This is the world before nationalism, before religious and linguistic consolidation, before identity hardened into something concrete and immutable. This world is low-lit and chaotic, ruled jointly by the unnatural and the supernatural.

Though this is a deeply philosophical novel or perhaps better put, a novel that is curious about humanity and alternately awe-struck and melancholy about what it learns *The Books of Jacob* is fundamentally a story of people, lots and lots of people, and how surprising they are, and the remarkable things they create: ideas, communities, histories, worlds. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the story of Frank captivated Tokarczuk at this time. There is a sense of a collective urge for self-determination in the air. The Polish account of its past invites new interpretations and leaves room for new, unobvious narratives at the personal level as much as at the level of the entire population with its entangled Polish-Jewish heritage. Tokarczuk emphasizes in interviews that *The Books of Jacob* is her most 'pro-social' project, in which she leaves herself on the side, and writes about other people and for the people.

*The Books of Jacob* is a weird book. Tokarczuk is baggy, profuse, and unembarrassed about being either. She toggles between perspectives every chapter, or even mid-chapter, and toggles between registers even more often than that. There are extensive digressions on the tripartite nature of God, the merits of Latin prose, and the ecology of the Dniester River.

In addition to Jacob and the not quite dead Yente, we meet a broadcast of supporting characters: Jacob's wife and daughter, Asher the world-weary doctor, the Kabbalist Shor family, the literary Rabbi Nahman, and Father Benedykt Chmielowski, who maintains a long and entertaining correspondence with Baroque poet Elżbieta Drużbacka on his encyclopedic works. The title of the real Chmielowski's encyclopedia, the first in Poland mirrors Tokarczuk's own extended title for the novel. Drużbacka, less whimsical and more resolute, urged Chmielowski to stop writing in Latin and make his text accessible to women and the lower classes.

*The Books of Jacob* is a novel in which, finally, words have been acknowledged as real things, like roses and ceramic bowls. It is as if, in slipping into those great word-landscapes,

our bodies fall apart, and when we return from ink and paper to the world, we must reconstitute ourselves, in new bodies, made of new words.

### Macrohistory of Microhistory

Macrohistory and microhistory are two subfields of the "new history" movement that originated in the latter half of the twentieth century, and they both claim to focus on real people in history. A macrohistory examines various societies and nations over millennia to draw general conclusions about the course of history. When writing microhistory, the author focuses on a single person or community and strives to comprehend larger problems at play through study and analysis.

The Frankish saga, which would be little more than a footnote in other European histories, provides material for novelist Olga Tokarczuk's epic *The Books of Jacob*. Through an extensive network of characters, including austere rabbis, Christian intellectuals, writers, aristocrats, secret societies, double spies, and adherents of Jacob Frank's blasphemous sect, the novel traverses Eastern Europe and recounts the rhythms and patterns of history. It's an encyclopaedic historical odyssey with a cast of characters and subplots galore that prevents the work from being reduced to just Jacob's story. Tokarczuk, on the other hand, depicts the underlying mechanisms of Poland and its neighbours. As James Joyce said: "In the particular is contained the universal." (*Quote by James Joyce*)

In some ways, this book is about Jacob Frank. The plot follows the movement of his life and myth as he gathers his followers together through visions and parables, the comet thought to be following his journey, and the "strange glow" circling his head. Tokarczuk's epic revolves around Jacob and his messianic promise. But this book is truly about Jacob's grandmother. It's about Yente and the viewpoints we use to create a historical story. It's about this enigmatic woman who flits between life and death, and what she sees and what her sight allows us to see.

True biographies of historical personalities go on parallel trains that rarely cross. One of these tracks, the one detailed in the media and history books, is clearly visible. It's tempting to follow Father Benedykt Chmielowski's lead and use the Polish expression "a horse is as everyone sees it," which directly translates to "the world is as everyone sees it." This is the official, completely visible reality, which has been thoroughly reviewed and agreed upon numerous times. This is where peace is made, alliances are forged, and everything appears to be as it should be. For the time being, theories that provide a flawless explanation of what is and what it means are in effect. God is good and merciful, but infinitely patient toward petty human acts that cause suffering. The world is like a box full of compartments, where everything has its place. And even when chaos intrudes, the mess is soon cleaned up and everything is returned to roughly the same position.

The second track, which is inferior and buried by consensus, is immense historical ignorance, which is characterised by suppressed wrath and despair, as well as unending unhappiness with the world and its structures. Humans constantly defy creation here, pointing out its folly and

meaninglessness. They have reservations. They are in disagreement. They are inquisitive. They are defiant. This suffocated, radical alternative occasionally breaks free and harasses the sunny side, which is certain of being right in the end and wallows in self-satisfaction and pride. Every heterodoxy originates in this location. This is where the dark mirror appears, in which everything that is commonly accepted, official, and obvious transforms into a grimace, a nightmare, something silly and hideous.

*The Books of Jacob* is a historical book written with the understanding that the overarching historical narrative has been formulated numerous times. Tokarczuk claims she would never have guessed, for example, how insignificant women's participation is in historical events, and how they appear only minimally and with no special significance in the key sources.

Everyone has a mother, wife, sister, or daughter, and they all know that they can't be absent from life's events unless they're in the army or a convent. The absence of women in the version of history that ends up in textbooks, according to Tokarczuk, is a symptom of a patriarchal worldview that fails to recognise and record women's accomplishments.

By methodically amassing every scrap of knowledge, Tokarczuk has found a place for them in her history. She did it out of a feeling of fairness, believing that the majority of human history should be rewritten from this perspective. She also tried, as much as was psychologically possible, to abandon her own modern morality. She was well aware that she was presenting a pre-Victorian world with different cohabitation laws in place.

Tokarczuk sticks close to the historical record but fills its gaps with made-up characters and charges the atmosphere with the daemonic energy of Jewish folk magic and a sense that God lurks nearby. Like Jesus, Frank stands at the centre of Tokarczuk's scripture, its object rather than its subject. "Even more than the psychology of the leader, it is the psychology of the led that demands to be understood," wrote Gershom Scholem, the great historian of Jewish messianism. ('Savior? Monster? A Messianic Leader Rallies His Followers.') Tokarczuk, who has read Scholem closely, agrees, although her epic tells the tales not just of Frank's followers, but of his Jewish enemies, Catholic abettors and the many others whose lives he upended.

This colossal book is a truly bewitching account of untold fissures in history, minor religions, little lives, and splinterings-off. It is rich, strange, astonishing in scope, and delightfully enigmatic, whether the reader plunges deep into its metaphysics or simply obtains "some slight enjoyment" is up to them. Tokarczuk's magnum opus shows us a world on the precipice of a great change, one hand clinging to certainty while the other reaches for transcendence. Of course, history shows us that certainty does not exist, and we will have to live with that or wait for our Messiah.

Tokarczuk's epic historical novel has the heft and magnitude of a holy book or an *Odyssey*. It makes a near-mythical landscape of 18th-century Europe (territories that translate to present-day Ukraine, Poland, Greece, Turkey, Austria, Germany and the Czech Republic) and narrates, through a swirling system of richly detailed stories, thousands of moments in the lives of its many characters, all of whom orbit whether briefly or perpetually, with hostility or with the blind

devotion of the apostles of the real-life religious sect leader Jacob Frank.

The novel is an attempt to do something unconventional and maybe even impossible with the medium of fiction. It is an attempt to ape the patternless, arbitrary stumble of history, not history as it really happened but history as it looks to us almost three centuries later.

### **Culture of Multiculturalism**

Multiculturalism refers to the co-existence of diverse religious, ethnic or cultural groups within a society. In contrast, cultural pluralism refers to a phenomenon where minority groups participate fully in the dominant society, but while maintaining their cultural differences.

Although this novel is deeply rooted in the complexities of Poland's past, particularly the troubled relationship between Jews and Catholics, its thoughtful depiction of the diverse and multicultural milieu of the eighteenth century is a powerful counterpoint to the sanitised visions of the past that are becoming increasingly central to global struggles over historical politics. Tokarczuk depicts a world of shifting alliances and ambiguous identities, in which multiple forms of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam coexist, but not always happily. There's rich prosperity and deplorable poverty, elegance and luxury, filth and mud, brutality and comfort. It's a difficult and perplexing world, with abrupt and unpredictable twists of fate. Tokarczuk does not glorify the past, but neither does she offer us the comforting illusion that we have left its barbarism behind. This is an unflinching and nuanced examination of what "civilization" really means.

In a multinational, heterogeneous, and diversified culture, the Frankist heresy was conceived. It ignored the restrictions of tradition, dogma, and custom as a mystical but pragmatic movement. It could be defined in today's debate as a challenge to outmoded identities and forms, as a precursor to anarchism and socialism. Furthermore, Tokarczuk's description of the event is unclear, as is the persona of Jacob Frank, a mystic and a ruler, revolutionary and strategist, quack and sage.

Tokarczuk writes in the novel's afterword that writing the book taught her that "so many things stay silently intertwined." The importance of the loud linkages, the apparent ties of race, religion, and nationhood, is downplayed in *The Books of Jacob*, as are the emotive links that span millennia, the basic love-and-fear emotions that let us understand Jacob's contemporaries. Tokarczuk encourages us to focus on the invisible commonalities, the butterfly-effect linkages of fate and circumstance that are absent from traditional historical accounts and present nationalistic myths.

Tokarczuk's role as an artist is to enrich rather than deconstruct the mysteries. Tokarczuk's adversary is the familiar's bounds. In an increasingly ethnonationalist Poland, she is also sceptical of political borders, which makes her contentious, if not loathed. Tokarczuk can say that Poland was never simply for Poles, but rather "a vast multicultural, multiethnic nation in intimate contact with its neighbours on all sides," thanks to Frankism.

Frank is an example of Polish multiculturalism. He spends his childhood among the borderland cities where the Ottoman

Empire meets Europe, having been born in an eastern Polish village. His amanuensis, Nahman, compares his street patois to raisin challah since he knows snatches of Ladino and Turkish as well as Yiddish. Frank defies practically all social conventions. When a merchant dies of the plague, he lies, bullies, and laughs. Frank makes his followers dance around a half-naked woman in the incident that brings him to the public's attention, a parodic inversion of a Jewish ritual in which Jews encircle the Torah. He is a master of paradox, making darkness appear to be light, lies appear to be true, and anarchy appears to be the new social order.

If Frank is the Lord, as his adherents claim, he is a Lord of Misrule. He seduces young boys and girls, insists on the Sabbatian tradition of "sexual hospitality" (sleeping with one's host's wife) and institutes polyamory. Some women are happy to cast off the old prescriptions, although others have reservations: They have little say in the choice of partner. The woman with the least say of all is Frank's daughter, whom he almost certainly abuses.

There is no dominant culture in multiculturalism, while there is a dominant culture in pluralism. Moreover, when the dominant culture is weakened, society could change from pluralism into multiculturalism.

### **Political Pluralism**

If the focus of cultural pluralism is empirical diversity manifested in values, practices, and beliefs, the core concern of pluralism in political science lies in the organizational and institutional articulation of competing individual and group interests.

Tokarczuk's stock-in-trade is defamiliarization, and it serves a political purpose here. She wants her multi-ethnic Europe to challenge the continent's current self-perception as a collection of nation-states where many people see themselves as distinct from the poorer and browner rest of the world.

Religion, according to Alfred North Whitehead, is the ultimate expression of allegiance to the world, while heresy is the deepest form of opposition to it. Every form of heresy contains a plan to change the world. Deconstruction of the bound faith leads to new blueprints for life and society's existence, a reclaiming of old ideas and their replacement with new ones. Heresy's advent is always revolutionary and always terrifying. It is the end of the world, which is why religious revolutions are typically accompanied by the concept of the "Last Judgment." The dangerous thing about heresy is not that God is being understood differently; the danger actually has nothing to do with theology. It is more than a change in the perception of a religious order is also a way of questioning the whole of the *human* order, a way of undermining the obvious nature of the laws that are in force, and that is why it so often leads to rebellion.

The Jewish Gnosticism tradition was heavily founded on Frankist heresy, although Christian elements were also present. Gnosis is older than Christianity, and it may even predate Judaism. It is a religious frame of mind that utterly undermines a person's comfortable position in the world, which it reveals to be hostile and inhuman, at best apathetic. Gnosticism is a powerful, ominous note that has played alongside the bright, happy trills of official faiths throughout history, in which God is kind and rewards good behaviour.

The unorthodox mind is restless and inquisitive, courageous and eager to try new things. Heterodoxy establishes the existence of a healthy spirit, a fundamental metaphysical intelligence that can be provided to anybody, not only the educated. Heresy, on the other hand, only appears where faith is truly strong, where it is taken seriously and lived out daily. That is why it is advantageous for any faith that needs to deal with religious heterodoxy. Fighting and destruction are not synonymous with grappling.

Rooting out heresy is like cutting oneself off from the sources of one's own strength and shifting into neutral gear. It is like paving over a reservoir of fresh water and only drinking water that circulates within a closed system.

The Books of Jacob contrast not only orthodox and apocalyptic Judaism but also other religions. Poland's dominant religion is Catholicism, which has long since settled the Messiah question. The manipulations of priests who push Frank toward baptism take up a considerable section of the narrative, possibly too much. The other faith is hidden from view. It's a kind of everyday belief. Its followers are largely women, and its worldview is pragmatic: live patiently, persistently, and without the prospect of salvation except via generational renewal. While spouses pore over books, women handle the ordinary rites of life upkeep, such as scrubbing menstrual blood out of clothing or preparing chickens.

### **Polysemic and Polyglottic Text**

Of course, all heresies and heretics call into question the established order. The Enlightenment was a period marked by a large deal of cross-pollination and diversity of ideas, people, and religions. Jennifer Croft refers to the work as a polyglot in her translator's comment. It exists in conversation with many others, not only its contemporaries, as all encyclopaedias, histories, and sacred books do. It mentions a slew of personalities and stories, each one mysterious enough to need its own history. Her work is sensitive to Tokarczuk's polysemy, the subtle ambiguity inherent in the Polish language, which Tokarczuk has praised in the past for its use in lyrical language as well as political commentary.

Tokarczuk covers all of the era's tragedies—pogroms, war, and abject poverty—but focuses on the mundane: kitchens and courtyards, fairy tales told to small children, dances, Turkish tobacco, embroidered tablecloths, and the arrangement of merchants' caravans snaking their way through Europe—all of which are the result of years of research.

To get lost, The Books of Jacob contain an entire bursting, sensory world. Everything in it is designed to make you feel disoriented, from the obfuscating weather and temporal shifts to the migratory collection of individuals with various names. Even the pagination is reversed, as if it were a Hebrew book, possibly to remind us that every familiar order is merely habitual.

Apart from Jacob Frank's turbulent past, the contains various deeper layers. Above all, it traces the spread of the greatest and most "ominous and deceiving" error in the heart of Judaism, according to Gershom Scholes. When describing Frank as a dangerous, evil individual peddling a nihilistic worldview, this distinguished academic did not attempt to hide his feelings. The narrative of a group of people whose

tenacity prompted them to embark on a perilous voyage, risking their very identities and exposing themselves to spiritual as well as political danger, is a sensation. If we also consider Frank's dogged, though ultimately unsuccessful endeavour to establish his own moderately independent territory within the borders of the Polish Kingdom, we could now say that this was a sort of proto-Zionism.

The constant quid pro quo, role-playing, posturing, the multilingual setting that often leads to misunderstandings, the colourful people — it all appeared to call for a literary frame, the epic medium of storytelling. The novel's depiction of Frank and his pals' escapades across a half-century exemplifies how full of bravery their story was. Tokarczuk does not regard them as threatening sectarians. Instead, she tells a universal story of people at the centre of a feudal society divided by divides, stratifications, and biases — a world held tight — who naturally seek liberty. Frank and his followers staged a multilateral, complex uprising that enraged everyone.

The Books of Jacob is another of Tokarczuk's "constellation books," as she refers to them. In an exciting relay of viewpoints, she passes the narrative baton from character to character, and she uses diaries, letters, poems, prophecies, and parables, as well as a regular narrative, to fit her purposes. Tokarczuk writes in the first person, third person, and "fourth person," which is a term she used to describe a quasi-omniscient hovering spirit: This narrator is Frank's grandmother, Yente, whose body is caught between life and death while her soul observes from above. Jacob, on the other hand, has his own picaresque novella. He is a Jewish Lazarillo de Tormes who uses his brains to climb the social ladder. One moment Frank and his disciples are studying the hidden attributes of God in beatific poverty; the next, they find themselves the unpleasantly exoticized guests of antisemitic Polish aristocrats, who are drunk on their own hospitality.

The narrative revolves around Frank's audacious endeavour to shatter and rewrite the laws of Judaism, and language and translation are at the heart of everything. Tokarczuk's obsession with Frank and the environment he lived in originates as much from her fascination with the power of words as anything else. "So much of Jewish culture is directed around language, toward the word, the power of the word and the depths of the word, its multitude of meanings and its openness to interpretation," she says in a recent interview with *The New Yorker*.

Tokarczuk reminds us that being able to express oneself through language is a process that must be constantly renegotiated and laboured over. The novel's initial discussion, between rabbi Elisha Shorr and Catholic priest Benedykt Chmielowski in the Ukrainian city of Rohatyn, stumbles over language. Chmielowski is working on *Nowe Ateny* (or *New Athens*), which will be the first Polish-language encyclopaedia, and his grandiose goal has prompted him to venture beyond Christian knowledge. He is especially eager to explore the vast world of Hebrew literature; unfortunately, he "cannot actually have access to that wisdom" since he lacks the language. He seeks out Shorr, a local rabbi known to possess an important collection of Hebrew books, but when the two scholars meet they find themselves unable to communicate. Their conversation must be passed, stiltedly, through the mouth of a teenage interpreter named Hryćko

(later, his name will change to Hayim, one of many such shifting monikers in this story).

Tokarczuk uses section breaks to keep her narrative moving along, describing her characters' psychological growth with the stress of discovery, the slow but steady movement of their thoughts. Nonetheless, this is a big, intricate novel about a particular religious movement from an odd time and place. It may be said to be written in protest of our short attention spans, the spinning news cycle, the pithy tweet, and the quick scroll. The novel also provides a challenge to modern literature in that it does not go into detail about Tokarczuk's personal life, yet she does not shy away from delving into her characters' spiritual and mystical ideas.

Tokarczuk's novel is also a form experiment, challenging us to acquire new ways to read. It's also an experimental historical narrative, serving as a kind of history reader's guide. Tokarczuk gives us a new historiographic method of seeing by writing about the women who are omitted from historical archives from an eccentric (ex-centric) standpoint.

It is a massive work, weighing in at about 1,000 pages. The epic usually spans large landscapes, examines many lives, spans years, and deals with major themes such as love, hope, sorrow, death, and the meaning of life. Jacob's Books are epic journeys through empires that span ages (it begins in 1752 but drifts back in time and then shoots forward, all the way through the Holocaust and, briefly, even the early 2010s). As Joyce once observed, "the universal is contained in the specific," and the epic novel, particularly Tokarczuk's, cannot express this collection of locations, eras, and themes without delving into the details of its characters' lives. The epic novel is epic because it contains immeasurable amounts of life, teeming cartloads overflowing with details.

The Books of Jacob is wonderful because of the sheer volume of its details, which are so sensual and exact that readers can't help but admire the novel's structure. Tokarczuk throws forth so much detail in the first few pages that the book functions as both a novel and a manifesto on creating historical fiction and retrieving, or revising, the past. Tokarczuk paints Jacob Frank's world with expressive strokes before we even meet him, and her mastery of detail makes other novels read like pixelated recreations of life.

This big historical tale, this imaginative epic, is in the process of being written. The narration is a theatrical act, in this case, saving the past by conjuring up facts. Tokarczuk also writes in the present tense, bringing the past — with all of its unrecorded lives, experiences, secrets, and dreams — to life as we read.

Tokarczuk generally abandons tactile description in the novel's final section, "The Book of Names," in favour of biographical facts. As Tokarczuk completes each of the characters' stories, her section headers list names. When the artist takes a step back from her miniatures, the writing becomes simpler and more direct; the rhythm quickens, and the organisation becomes more rational. She clears her workspace, closes her reference books, turns off her laptop, and leaves.

## **Multipersonality Protagonist**

Jacob Frank is a complicated individual. He may consider himself a Messiah, but his taste for the finer things in life, money, and the opposite sex do not exactly fit the mould of what a Messiah should be. While essentially Jewish, his beliefs do tilt towards Christianity in several ways. Converting to both Islam and Christianity for a Jewish Messiah does sound strange. Jacob Frank was a mystic and a dictator, a revolutionary and a strategist, a quack and a philosopher, according to Tokarczuk.

Jacob Frank's story is so incredible that it's hard to believe it actually happened. In a nutshell, it tells the story of a huge number of eighteenth-century Jews from Podolia who became followers of Jacob Frank, a trader who declared Islam at one point before commanding the group's conversion to Catholicism with considerable pomp. By combining aspects of Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Kabbalah, and mysticism, Jacob Frank founded the Frankists, a syncretic and maverick cult.

Frank was obviously charismatic, but he was also a psychopath to some extent. He possessed a strong personality, intelligence, and charm that he used to win over people from all walks of life. It's difficult to grasp a personality like this by reading simply his somewhat poorly written parables and fairy tales, yet that's how he normally addressed his audience.

In Jacob's Books, an ambiguous figure emerges: brutal but also sensitive, unexpected but also attentive. Mad, but also practical and businesslike. He's a con artist, a charmer, and a liar. Because Tokarczuk could not understand how to cope with this figure empathetically, she decided to present Jacob Frank through the eyes of others, without daring to go too close.

Jacob Frank and his family are deliberately opaque. Jacob has large erections during spiritual seances, slaps his underlings when they fail him, and has sex with a harem of young women, but Tokarczuk doesn't spend much time illustrating what draws his followers to his sect. The same can be said for his daughter Eva, whose romantic prospects are the centre of the novel's second half; the narrator repeatedly informs us that everyone thinks she's gorgeous, but we never learn anything about her personality.

Sabbatai Zvi, the most well-known self-proclaimed messiah in modern Jewish history, was prosecuted for sedition by the Ottoman sultan in 1666 and given the option of Islam or death. He decided on Islam. His defection did not stop his sect and a new religion, Sabbateanism, from spreading over Europe and the Ottoman Empire. Sabbateanism produced another messiah nearly a century later. Jacob Frank was his name. He pushed the heresies to the point where they became Christianity, complete with a Trinitarian God and a Cross cult. In 1759, Frank led tens of thousands of his followers into Polish Catholic churches to be baptised voluntarily, shocking the Jewish world.

Frank was dubbed "one of the darkest, slyest, and most deceptive villains of the 18th century" by 19th-century historian Heinrich Graetz. Frank by Tokarczuk defies easy categorization. After all, his charisma is quite extraordinary. Despite his pockmarked visage and often absurd clothing, even sceptics find him irresistibly attractive. His presence has a narcotic-like soothing impact and a psychedelic-like reality-

enhancing effect. "Everything takes on a significance wherever he turns up, everything comes together like it's been tidied up," an acolyte adds. Frank isn't faking his wizardry, according to the novel. He can read people's minds and control nature. When his followers lose hope, he stabs the earth with a knife and then looks up: "A V formation of cranes flying over their heads loses its shape, the birds collide, and the birds begin to circle high above them, chaotically." The cranes return to their original positions after he pulls out the knife. "Woe is you," he says if you forget who I am.

Tokarczuk avoids getting too close to Jacob's persona, instead portraying him through the views of his contemporaries, both devout believers and sceptics. She pays special attention to women's and outsiders' viewpoints, which experienced the brunt of the Enlightenment's growing pains but are noticeably absent from official history. This polyphonic technique is never hidden: each character has a profound, sincere, and frequently amusing "psychological portrait." We see the alleged Messiah as a child, saying goodnight to every living on the planet, just as Adam did when named the creatures of Eden. A Kabbalist amulet is presented to Yente, an elderly woman on her deathbed at a wedding, to postpone her death, and she drinks it with a secretive smile.

Jacob Frank is portrayed as a mystic and a ruler, as a revolutionary and a strategist, as a quack and as a wise. Jacob's pragmatism (changing to other religions as needed) and spiritual hedonism were heretical, but they set the groundwork for a decidedly modern contempt for dogma and tradition.

"History is merely a never-ending interpretation of real and imagined events from the past that allows us to detect previously unseen significance in it," Tokarczuk adds. Whatever meaning we find in his story, Jacob Frank himself remains a mystery, a shape-shifter, a sage, a revolutionary, a quack who still generated an entire movement around his ideas. It is our responsibility to explain how or why. It may seem strange to study the lost history of a Jewish mystic and the cult he founded at this time, but *The Books of Jacob* is ultimately about the quest for emancipation in the face of a shattered and varied reality that resembles our own. And a Messiah, even an ambiguous one, only ever arrives in the darkest moments of the human scourge, war, persecution, and rot.

Throughout Eastern and Central Europe, Frank uses a hybrid, opportunistic language. His speech is filthy in every meaning of the term, and it is improvised, constantly changing in response to the regions and tongues that he and his followers encounter. It makes him stand out wherever he goes since "in every language Jacob speaks, a foreign accent can be detected."

Frank's language is mutable, as evidenced by the fact that his followers are referred to as "changelings." These Frankists, as history will call them, roam Europe in quest of a safe sanctuary to worship their Messiah, morphing from Jews to Catholic neophytes and losing their attire and mother tongues along the way. Frank even miraculously sheds his skin at one point, "moulting like a snake." The altering of names is a linguistic and symbolic record of these transformations. Frank is constantly rebranding himself. He is Yankiele as a youngster and Jacob Leybowicz as a young man. He takes the

name Jacob Frank after his wedding in Nikopol, Ukraine. "Frank, or Frenk, signifies alien," says the narrator.

Foreignness, for Frank, is a characteristic to be welcomed, even appreciated, because it allows one to "float like a spirit among those who are remote and unrecognisable," waking "a specific type of intelligence – and ability to infer, to grasp the things that aren't clear." Only Yente, the novel's panoptic narrator, goes through a more radical transformation than Frank in *The Books of Jacob*. Tokarczuk portrays Jacob as an enigma seen through the perspective of others. She doesn't let us into his dying thoughts, but she does immerse us in Yente's body and spirit, beginning and closing the tale with her.

Frank, whose Kabbalistic teachings and mystic rituals led to him being hailed as the Messiah by some and cursed as a heretic by others, lived an extraordinary life: raised Jewish, he travelled Europe as a merchant, proclaimed himself the messianic rabbi Sabbatai Tzvi, converted first to Islam, then Catholicism was cursed by Polish rabbis, spent a decade imprisoned by the Roman Catholics in the Jason It's difficult to imagine a better writer-subject pairing: Frank is complex and contradictory, his presence all-consuming and impossible to nail down; Tokarczuk is clever, sensitive, and encyclopaedic, like a writer Borges fantasised about. Together with Croft, they form a kind of trinity, three figures combining to form one indivisible body.

The novel's polymorphic structure shows us how Jacob manages to play Christians and Jews off one another for his own social and financial benefit. Even when he's imprisoned in a Polish monastery, he finds ways to maintain his lavish lifestyle, complete with a retinue of servants and sexual partners chosen from his followers' wives and daughters.

The Frankist cult was an example of the religious anarchy released by the Enlightenment, according to allusions to what is happening around the world at the time. However, the plot becomes more comprehensive while also becoming more mysterious. Jacob, the central protagonist in all of these rumours, legends, prayers, and condemnations, is a perplexing figure who alternates between manic and pathetic, terrible and comical. And Tokarczuk lures his followers into a series of disasters as a result of their obsessive devotion to a greedy charlatan, a sexual abuser, and a propagator of spiritual nonsense.

The ambiguous figure of Frank in Tokarczuk's novel has been examined as a heretic, fabulator, translator, and, finally, an ideologue, and a gradual transcendence from the anarchic and subversive currents that gave rise to the Frankist discursive revolution to dogmatic and authoritarian rigidity that led to its fall has been traced.

## Conclusion

In *The Books of Jacob*, Tokarczuk offers a detailed and nuanced insight into European societies marked by anti-Semitism, opportunism, and political intrigues. Contrary to the isolationism and exclusionism inherent to nationalism, as it is encountered in Poland and across the world, Tokarczuk insists on multiplicity, diversity, and connectivity. With the rise of right-wing nationalism in Poland, Tokarczuk's focus on the country's long history of pluralism and ethnic mixing makes her a dissident witness to national history. She was branded, a "targowiczanin" an old-fashioned term for traitor

and vilified by right-wing nationalists. Precisely when the country's leaders would turn to a 'long-standing mythology of the country as homogenous Catholic nation', one endangered by migrants and a liberal 'rainbow plague'. Tokarczuk draws attention to the historic interactions between Poles, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Germans, Ruthenians, and Jews that have shaped the multivalent national consciousness as it exists today (Archibald). Her subtle and sensuous masterpiece weaves together the stories of characters searching for a meaningful life and spiritual truth in Eastern and Southeastern Europe during the second half of the 18th century. The features like a synthesis of reason and sensibility, integrated pluralism and transcendence of modernism and postmodernism can be identified in Tokarczuk's metamodern novel, *The Books of Jacob*. The Pragmatic protagonist, Jacob Frank defined himself in his mythical autobiography, known as "The Words of the Lord" as a chosen messianic Leader and as an anarchist visionary who decided to cross every border and destroy every book, law and order.

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