

# #23

# SOCRATIC DIALOGUES ON A COMPLEX BODY– SOUL RELATION IN PLATO'S *PHAEDO* AND OLGA TOKARCZUK'S *FLIGHTS*

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**Abstract** || This paper sets out the possibility of reading Olga Tokarczuk's novel *Flights* in the context of Plato's dialectic method as represented in his dialogues. Plato's philosophy on the body-soul relation, as analyzed in *Phaedo*, sets the groundwork for the discussion of Tokarczuk's metaphysical enquiry into the extreme corporeal experience (amputation and phantom pains) and its projection on the human understanding of the nature of the soul.

**Keywords** || Body and Soul | Socratic Dialogues | Plato | Embodiment | Olga Tokarczuk | *Flights* | Kenneth Burke | Cruel Optimism

**Resumen** || Este artículo propone una lectura de la novela de Olga Tokarczuk, *Flights*, en el contexto del método dialéctico de Platón, tal como se representa en sus diálogos. La filosofía de Platón sobre la relación cuerpo-alma, como se analiza en *Phaedo*, sienta las bases para la discusión de la investigación metafísica de Tokarczuk sobre la experiencia corporal extrema (amputación y dolores fantasmas) y su proyección sobre la comprensión humana de la naturaleza del alma.

**Palabras clave** || Cuerpo y alma | Diálogos socráticos | Platón | Encarnación | Olga Tokarczuk | *Flights* | Kenneth Burke | Optimismo cruel

**Resum** || Aquest article planteja la possibilitat de llegir la novel·la *Flights* d'Olga Tokarczuk en el context del mètode dialèctic de Plató. La filosofia platònica sobre la relació cos-ànima que s'exposa en el *Fedó* serveix de base per a plantejar la discussió sobre el pensament metafísic de Tokarczuk al voltant d'experiències extracorpòries (amputació o membres fantasma) i la seva projecció en la concepció humana de la naturalesa de l'ànima.

**Paraules clau** || Cos i ànima | Diàlegs socràtics | Plató | Encarnació | Olga Tokarczuk | *Flights* | Kenneth Burke | Cruel optimisme

...there were two loves, a higher and a lower,  
holy and unholy, a love of the mind and a love of the body

Socrates *Phaedo*

## 0. Introduction

On the day of his death in a prison cell, Socrates addresses the jailer who brought him a jar with the poison with the question: “What do you say about making a libation out of this cup to any god? May I, or not?” (*Phaedo* 1053)<sup>1</sup>. To that, the jailer offers an open-ended response, explaining more in a philosophical than a procedural way that “[w]e only prepare, Socrates, just so much as we deem enough.” And thus, in the very last moment before drinking the cup with hemlock, Socrates yields himself to the protection of the transcended divinities, acknowledging that he “may and must ask the gods to prosper [his] journey from this to the other world.” This declaration would not have been surprising if it had not been for the choice of the god. When the poison was already making its devastating yet unnaturally calm journey towards Socrates’ heart, “he uncovered his face, for he had covered himself up, and said —they were his last words— he said: Crito, I owe a cock to Asclepius; will you remember to pay the debt?” After Crito’s assertion that the debt would be paid, the only sound which was heard from Socrates was the sound of the last bodily movement after which his companions realized that “the wisest and justest and best” man they had known had just passed away. The closing lines of the dialogue *Phaedo* sound perplexing as they invoke a sacrificial offering made by Socrates to the god of medicine —Asclepius— the son of Apollo and a skillful physician taught the art of healing by Centaur Chiron. Does that suggest that Socrates viewed life as a kind of sickness?

This question has inspired a number of scholarly debates (Crooks, 1998; Gill, 1973; Most, 1993; Wilson, 2007) and in this article it will serve as an opening line for yet another exploration of the topic of the human approach to the phenomenon of the bodily deficiency in the context of the opposition of the body versus soul in Plato’s dialogues. Then, in the light of Kenneth Burke’s theory of metaphor as a perspective and Lauren Berlant’s concept of cruel optimism, a corresponding line of argument on a complex body-soul relation will be given a contemporary perspective through the analysis of a human dialogue with the disabled body in Olga Tokarczuk’s *Flights*. In her novel, the winner of the 2018 Nobel Prize in Literature skilfully revives Plato’s philosophy, which proclaims the subordination of the mortal body to the divine soul. Focusing on the analysis of one of Tokarczuk’s characters —Filip Verheyne, a 17<sup>th</sup> century anatomist who succumbed to the obsession over his amputated leg— I will argue that the body’s impairment may turn into an inescapable trap for the tormented soul. The incapacitating dominance of the bodily

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## NOTES

1 | All the references to Plato’s Dialogues (*The Apology*, *Cratylus*, *Crito*, *Euthyphro*, *Gorgias*, *Protagoras*, *Republic*, *Sophist*, *Symposium*, *Timaeus*) come from the 19<sup>th</sup> century University of Oxford edition (1891) translated by Benjamin Jowett and released online by Project Gutenberg. The page numbers refer to Project Gutenberg release available at <[https://webs.ucm.es/info/dicix/gente/agf/plato/The\\_Dialogues\\_of\\_Plato\\_v0.1.pdf](https://webs.ucm.es/info/dicix/gente/agf/plato/The_Dialogues_of_Plato_v0.1.pdf)>.

“lower order”, in Plato’s terms, leads first to the encroachment upon the soul’s provinces of the incorporeal, the invisible and the intangible, to eventually destroy the human integrity.

## 1. Plato’s dialogues

The *Phaedo* is the last of the “trial and death” dialogues written by Plato to commemorate his teacher, Socrates, after he was sentenced to death by the state of Athens in 399 B.C. The first one, the *Euthyphro*, portrays Socrates in discussion in front of the court where he would soon be on trial for impiety and corrupting the young. Socrates’ defense before the jury is described in the *Apology* and then the *Crito* takes place in his prison cell, leading up to the philosopher’s last day of life depicted in the *Phaedo*. Yet these are only four of about thirty philosophical dialogues authored by Plato throughout the period of fifty years. The first three dialogues—the *Euthyphro*, *Apology* and *Crito*—represent chronologically the first group of dialogues, referred to as “Socratic” due to the highest resemblance to Socrates’ views on ethics. Among these there are also the *Gorgias* and *Protagoras*, written probably by the end of that first period. The *Phaedo* stands out in the “trial and death” group, as it merges the account of what Socrates said with Plato’s own metaphysical and epistemological worldview. Representing the “middle” period in Plato’s writings, after the philosopher had founded his own Academy in Athens, the *Phaedo* introduces, among others, the four arguments for the soul’s immortality and the most distinctive of Plato’s theories—the theory of Forms (or Ideas, as it is sometimes referred to). Socrates’ role fades out in the last group of the so called “later” dialogues, which, as in the *Sophist* and *Statesman*, dwell on and master the philosophy presented in the “middle” period.

### 1.1. Dialogic nature of Plato’s philosophy

“Then, said Glaucon, let us have the tale over again; is not the road to Athens just made for conversation?” (*Symposium* 1644). Plato models his framework of knowledge on conversation, which may be defined as a linguistic exchange built on question and answer. Thus the term “dialectic” derives from the Greek verb *dialegesthai* (*converse with*) and the interrogative speech represents for Plato certainly the best model for intellectual activity. In this form Plato preserved the conversational model of philosophy practiced by Socrates who never wrote but spoke with his fellow companions. Plato himself, however, never appears in his dialogues in person, and, in consequence, his absence makes the interpretation of his philosophy problematic (Fink, 2012: 159). Through Socrates in the *Phaedo* we learn about the method as if “first-hand” (1042):

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[T]his was the method which I adopted: I first assumed some principle which I judged to be the strongest, and then I affirmed as true whatever seemed to agree with this, whether relating to the cause or to anything else; and that which disagreed I regarded as untrue. But I should like to explain my meaning more clearly, as I do not think that you as yet understand me. No indeed, replied Cebes, not very well. There is nothing new, he said, in what I am about to tell you; but only what I have been always and everywhere repeating in the previous discussion and on other occasions: I want to show you the nature of that cause which has occupied my thoughts.

Following on Socrates' explanation of the method, Hugh H. Benson (2015: 11) formulates two assumptions about the nature of knowledge professed by the philosopher in the dialogues, namely: "[a] Socrates takes himself to lack knowledge, and [b] Socrates seeks and encourages others to seek the knowledge he and they lack." Even though the form of a dialogue may to some imply a certain dose of chance in the formulation of the important philosophical matters, yet Plato, despite his distrust in philosophical writing (and written language in general), is regarded as a highly systematic thinker.

To strike balance between these two seemingly incongruent strands of Plato's method, Jakob Leth Fink (2012: 159) proposed the term "perspectivism", namely "the idea that the doctrinal content of the dialogues is essentially context-dependent." Perspectivism may account for the fact that alternative accounts of a particular idea (such as body-soul relation presented in the *Phaedo* and *Timaeus*) are in fact parallel and "both might be seen as sub-schemata for some more general or more abstract schema" (Fink, 2012: 172). What should be made central in this particular discussion on dialectic method, which will later resonate with the literary analysis of *Flights* by Olga Tokarczuk, is the assumption that "[t]he Platonic Dialogue is the literary transformation, in a word, of what was the intimately home-grown method of Socrates, not only of conveying truth to others, but of *coming by it for himself*" (Pater, [1910] 2013: 177, emphasis added). In other words, in their inner discussions on the meaning of life, Tokarczuk's characters concur with Socratic emphasis on *seeking* for answers since it is the "importance of *seeking* for knowledge, rather than the provision for answers" and "the desire *to beget through enquiry*" (Rhees and Phillips, 2004: xii, emphasis in original) which leads the humans to the essence of their existence. Just like Socrates loitering in common spaces and traversing the suburban roads, so are Tokarczuk's characters predestined to a constant movement, both literally and philosophically. For their inner dialogues resemble the journeys which "proceeded to truth, not by the analysis and application of an axiom, but by a gradual suppression of error, of error in the form of partial or exaggerated truths on the subject-matter" (Drake, 2011: 179). For the dialogue on the road, whether a real one or a metaphorical one, promotes the movement of the mind, which may have found a perfect vehicle in the dialogue.

## 1.2. Body and soul in Plato's dialogues through the lens of Kenneth Burke's philosophy of embodied perspective

However “quixotic” (Hanhijärvi, 2019: 1) or idealistic Plato's philosophy may have seemed already since Aristotle and Aristophanes up to Vlastos (Vlastos, 1975; 1981) for its overt reliance on ambiguities, utopias and faulty logic, and despite the recent interest in his defence (Castañeda 1972, Fine 2003; Irwin 1995;), Plato will invariably be credited with sparking the philosophical interest in the essence of the human soul. Through the properties of the soul, Plato engages in a parallel inspection of the human body, since these two are constantly juxtaposed as if the body was invented to prove the opposite of the soul. In his book on Platonism, Horatio Walter Pater ([1910] 2013: 145) provides a concise one-sentence summary of the body-soul relation: “It was, in short, as if for the soul to have come into a human body at all, had been the seed of disease in it, the beginning of its own proper death.” A crucial element of Plato's philosophy was the Socratic idea that a man should care for the soul rather than the body. The body, presented primarily as a physical trap of the immaterial entity called the soul (as in the *Cratylus*), is, on the one hand, unambiguously distinct from the soul (as in the *Phaedo*), but, at the same time, its existence is indispensable to explain the soul's abstraction (as in the *Republic* or *Timaeus*). The constant balance between the aesthetic qualities of the unseen and the verity of what is worldly, real and visible has been interpreted by Pater ([1910] 2013: 140) as “the paradox of Plato's genius.” As the author further explains:

[Plato's] aptitude for things visible, with the gift of words, empowers him to express, as if for the eyes, what except to the eye of the mind is strictly invisible, what an acquired asceticism induces him to rank above, and sometimes, in terms of harshest dualism, oppose to, the sensible world.

This observation evokes Kenneth Burke's (1941: 422, emphasis in original) theory of the *degrees of being*, which posits that “characters possess *degrees of being* in proportion to the variety of perspectives from which they can with justice be perceived.”

Yet in Plato's visions of the body and soul, it is both easy and hard to distinguish which entity possesses “more being” than the other. If we take Burke's concept where “animals have more being than plants” and “men have more being than animals” literally, thus the higher order would be ascribed to the soul and the lower to the body. However, this does not necessarily imply that the body possesses less being than the soul, since the soul is configured in the body and for its own being it requires the parallel being of the body. This discussion can be located again in Burke's theory of four master tropes (1941: 421), where metaphor stands for perspective, metonymy for reduction, synecdoche for representation and irony

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for dialectic. This frame allows us to treat the body-soul relation metaphorically as “metaphor tells us something about one character as considered from the point of view of another character” (Burke, 1941: 422). To put it in a more schematic way, Burke explains that “to consider A from the point of view of B is, of course, to use B as a *perspective* upon A” (Burke, 1941: 422, emphasis in original] Thus, in Plato’s universe, to consider the soul from the point of view of the body is to use the body as a *perspective* upon the soul. What aides this process of perspectivizing the soul through the body is the notion of language developing by, metaphorical extension” (Burke, 1941: 425). Through “borrowing words from the realm of the corporeal, visible, tangible and applying them by analogy to the realm of the incorporeal, invisible, intangible” (Burke, 1941: 425) we can cognitively carry over corporeal references to their intangible equivalents and in this way render the spiritual matters in more readily conceptualized materialistic (embodied) perspective.

### 1.3. Body as the “grave” of the soul in the *Phaedo*

To explain the provenance of the word “body”, Socrates abandons the logic of analogy and instead enters a “realm of opinion, where some say one thing, some another, and where only inconclusive reasoning exists” (Riley, 2005: 60). A set of explanations nonetheless revolves around the notion of the body as enclosed space, a trap, or even a grave of the soul (*Cratylus* 163):

HERMOGENES: But what shall we say of the next word?

SOCRATES: You mean *soma* (the body).

HERMOGENES: Yes.

SOCRATES: That may be variously interpreted; and yet more variously if a little permutation is allowed. For some say that the body is the grave (*sema*) of the soul which may be thought to be buried in our present life; or again the index of the soul, because the soul gives indications to (*semainei*) the body; probably the Orphic poets were the inventors of the name, and they were under the impression that the soul is suffering the punishment of sin, and that the body is an enclosure or prison in which the soul is incarcerated, kept safe (*soma, sozetai*), as the name *soma* implies, until the penalty is paid.

Relying first on abstract intellect for the definition of the soul and on a set of opinions for the definition of the body, Socrates reveals the limits of analogy to link the divine to the human realm. Riley (2005: 60) puts forward a conclusion hinging on the conviction of the inconstitubility (Burke, 1969) of the body and soul exemplified in the incongruity of methodological approaches, rendering contradictory results: “Just as one set of judgments connects the divine [soul] and mortal [body] realms, the other set begins to break the connection down and to portray the divine and mortal realms as adversary.”

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In the *Phaedo*, which recounts the last day of Socrates' life, two young philosophers, Simmias and Cebes, probe Socrates on the body-soul relation in the reference to a philosopher's true desire, namely, death. In the case of this particular dialogue, the dialectic method presented more in a narrative than a dialogic form, serves as the most relevant commentary to the topic of the soul's superiority over the body as the exchanges between the three interlocutors are developed with great attention to detail around the ethical proof of the soul's immortality. Apart from the meticulously designed proof for the aspiration of the soul after another state of being, what also strikes us is the calmness of the scene preceding Socrates' death. The philosopher seems noble and gentle at the same time, and his fondness for dialectic does not falter despite the non-negotiable circumstances. Let us follow then Socrates' last conversation to trace the progress of thought on the clash between the physical laws we must obey and the higher law which raises us above them in the search for immortality.

Prompted by the inevitability of the approaching moment of death, Socrates endeavours to prove that a "real philosopher has reason to be of good cheer when he is about to die, and that after death he may hope to obtain the greatest good in the other world" (1020). In order to combine the presentation of Plato's philosophy on the body-soul relation with the demonstration of the method of the Socratic dialogue, my decision was to select several longer passages from the *Phaedo* so that the dialectic method of reasoning could be comprehensively illustrated. Moreover, the psychological model of desire in the *Phaedo* is so unique that it stands apart from other Platonic texts. As observed by George Boys-Stones (2004: 4), Plato's vision of the desire "for corporeal stimulation or satisfaction" in other dialogues "forms a distinct 'part' of the soul, of which another part is reason" and thus "the *pleasure* [emphasis in original] which is posited by desire as the end of human activity is itself something that registers *in the soul* [emphasis added]." This is quite the opposite in the *Phaedo*, where desire belongs entirely to the body (1021, emphasis added):

And when real philosophers consider all these things, will they not be led to make a reflection which they will express in words something like the following? 'Have we not found,' they will say, 'a path of thought which seems to bring us and our argument to the conclusion, that **while we are in the body, and while the soul is infected with the evils of the body, our desire will not be satisfied?** And our desire is of the truth. For the **body is a source of endless trouble** to us by reason of the mere requirement of food; and is liable also to diseases which overtake and impede us in the search after true being: it **fills us full of loves, and lusts, and fears, and fancies of all kinds, and endless foolery**, and in fact, as men say, takes away from us the power of thinking at all. **Whence come wars, and fightings, and factions? whence but from the body and the lusts of the body?** wars are occasioned by the love



of money, and money has to be acquired for the sake and in the service of the body; and by reason of all these impediments we have no time to give to philosophy; and, last and worst of all, even if we are at leisure and betake ourselves to some speculation, the body is always breaking in upon us, causing turmoil and confusion in our enquiries, and so amazing us that we are prevented from seeing the truth.

As proven in this fragment, in the *Phaedo* Plato diverges from his “standard” view of desires being part of the *psyche* and claims that they belong to the body from which they may not be uprooted. This statement on the inability of bringing desires under the influence of reason stands in contrast to such dialogues as the *Timaeus* in which Plato “makes it very clear that reason and philosophy are forces which counter-balance the influence of physical state: a person becomes bad because of a bad state of body *and* an ‘upbringing without education’ (86e); or where a poor state of body *combines with* a poor government and poor parenting (87b)” (Boys-Stones, 2004: 6, emphasis in original).

Therefore, it seems that the argumentation on the body-soul distinction in the *Phaedo* is ultimately intended to present body and soul as stark opposites without any space for rapprochement. The evidence for such a strategy can be found in the three following passages where the body-soul relation is presented on the three planes composed on a rule of contrast between: (1) pure (soul) / impure (body); (2) unseen (soul) / seen (body); and (3) divine (soul) / mortal (body). Let us then give the voice to Socrates, first arguing for the purity of the soul as opposed to the impurity of the body (1022, emphasis added):

It has been proved to us by experience that if we would have pure knowledge of anything we must be quit of the body—the soul in herself must behold things in themselves: and then we shall attain the wisdom which we desire, and of which we say that we are lovers, not while we live, but after death; for if **while in company with the body, the soul cannot have pure knowledge**, one of two things follows—either knowledge is not to be attained at all, or, if at all, after death. For then, and not till then, the soul will be parted from the body and exist in herself alone. In this present life, I reckon that **we make the nearest approach to knowledge when we have the least possible intercourse or communion with the body, and are not surfeited with the bodily nature, but keep ourselves pure** until the hour when God himself is pleased to release us. And thus having got rid of the foolishness of the body we shall be pure and hold converse with the pure, and know of ourselves the clear light everywhere, which is no other than the light of truth.’ **For the impure are not permitted to approach the pure.** These are the sort of words, Simmias, which the true lovers of knowledge cannot help saying to one another, and thinking. You would agree; would you not? Undoubtedly, Socrates.

Having proven the degrading role of the “foolish” body, which corrupts the soul, searching for the “light of truth,” Socrates moves the planes

and traces the incompatibility of body and soul to the realm of “seen” and “not seen” (1029, emphasis added):

And what we mean by ‘seen’ and ‘not seen’ is that which is or is not visible to the eye of man? Yes, to the eye of man. And is the soul seen or not seen? Not seen. Unseen then? Yes. **Then the soul is more like to the unseen, and the body to the seen?** That follows necessarily, Socrates. And were we not saying long ago that the soul when using the body as an instrument of perception, that is to say, when using the sense of sight or hearing or some other sense (for the meaning of perceiving through the body is perceiving through the senses)—were we not saying that the **soul too is then dragged by the body into the region of the changeable, and wanders and is confused;** the world spins round her, and she is like a drunkard, when she touches change? Very true. But **when returning into herself she reflects, then she passes into the other world, the region of purity, and eternity, and immortality, and unchangeableness,** which are her kindred, and with them she ever lives, when she is by herself and is not let or hindered; then she ceases from her erring ways, and being in communion with the unchanging is unchanging. **And this state of the soul is called wisdom?** That is well and truly said, Socrates, he replied.

Finally, Socrates refers to the argument of subordination ordered by nature. Since the role of the soul is to govern over the body, thus this role predestines the soul to side with the divine, while the body must remain mortal (1030, emphasis added):

**When the soul and the body are united, then nature orders the soul to rule and govern, and the body to obey and serve.** Now which of these two functions is akin to the divine? and which to the mortal? Does not the divine appear to you to be that which naturally orders and rules, and the mortal to be that which is subject and servant? True. And which does the soul resemble? **The soul resembles the divine, and the body the mortal**—there can be no doubt of that, Socrates. Then reflect, Cebes: of all which has been said is not this the conclusion?—that **the soul is in the very likeness of the divine, and immortal, and intellectual, and uniform, and indissoluble, and unchangeable;** and that **the body is in the very likeness of the human, and mortal, and unintellectual, and multiform, and dissoluble, and changeable.** Can this, my dear Cebes, be denied? It cannot.

For each characteristic of the soul (divine, immortal, intellectual, uniform, indissoluble, unchangeable), there is implied an antithetical quality of the body (human, mortal, unintellectual, multiform, dissoluble, changeable). It suffices to say that the negative connotations of the body make clear Plato’s views in the *Phaedo* about the immortality of the soul. As observed by Boys-Stones (2004: 15, emphasis in original) this clear-cut opposition “allows him a clear run at showing in the strongest possible terms that the *minimum* one would have to believe about the soul is that reason at least is separable from the body and not liable to dissolution.”

To conclude, the observation must be made that the body-soul relation which perplexed Socrates and Plato, continues to preoccupy modern philosophers who constantly put Plato’s *Phaedo* to the test of

logic. Let me then finish this section on a semi-dialectic note with the set of still relevant open-ended questions posed in 1871 by Benjamin Jowett, a prominent theologian and a translator of Plato from the University of Oxford:

For what idea can we form of the soul when separated from the body? Or how can the soul be united with the body and still be independent? Is the soul related to the body as the ideal to the real, or as the whole to the parts, or as the subject to the object, or as the cause to the effect, or as the end to the means? Shall we say with Aristotle, that the soul is the entelechy or form of an organized living body? or with Plato, that she has a life of her own? Is the Pythagorean image of the harmony, or that of the monad, the truer expression? Is the soul related to the body as sight to the eye, or as the boatman to his boat? (Arist. de Anim.) And in another state of being is the soul to be conceived of as vanishing into infinity, hardly possessing an existence which she can call her own, as in the pantheistic system of Spinoza: or as an individual informing another body and entering into new relations, but retaining her own character? (Compare Gorgias.) Or is the opposition of soul and body a mere illusion, and the true self neither soul nor body, but the union of the two in the 'I' which is above them? And is death the assertion of this individuality in the higher nature, and the falling away into nothingness of the lower? Or are we vainly attempting to pass the boundaries of human thought? The body and the soul seem to be inseparable, not only in fact, but in our conceptions of them; and any philosophy which too closely unites them, or too widely separates them, either in this life or in another, disturbs the balance of human nature (1001).

## 2. Olga Tokarczuk on a body-soul relation

The disturbance of the balance of the human nature caused by the unresolved nature of body-soul relation speaks to us with the similar voice of contemporary writers and continues to appeal to the same provinces of emotions. In an interview during the International Festival of Literature "Apostrophe" in March 2019, Olga Tokarczuk referred to these emotions which are activated through the experience of reading. Half a year before Tokarczuk received the Nobel Prize, she called literature "a very sophisticated language of communication, which refers to empathy and empathic communication with another person." Tokarczuk went as far as to call literature a partaker in "a miracle" which "allows us to penetrate other people's biographies." So what happens when we read? Tokarczuk has no doubt that our encounter with the fictional world is a deeply transforming experience (Gruszczyński, 2019):

Reading, people become larger, have a wider awareness. Especially the novel allows us to become someone else for a while and live someone else's life. He comes out of such a novel as from a wonderful journey into a virtual, extremely convincing world that is remembered for a long time and which changes our perception probably forever.

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A novel which has left such a trace for many, and for some (as myself) may have even changed the terms of meaning of life, is Olga Tokarczuk's *Flights* (2007 Polish, 2017 English). Let me introduce *Flights* in an unconventional way — through another book. In 2018, Olga Tokarczuk in collaboration with Joanna Concejo, a graphic artist and illustrator, published a book— a short story, a parable, but most accurately, a piece of art with astounding graphics —titled *Zagubiona dusza [A Lost Soul]*. The story begins as follows:

There was once a man who worked a lot and very quickly and long ago left his soul somewhere far behind. He had a good life without a soul—he slept, ate, worked, drove a car and even played tennis. Sometimes, however, he felt that everything around him was too flat, as if he were moving on a smooth sheet of a maths notebook, a sheet of paper that is covered with even grids (Tokarczuk and Concejo, 2018).

What happens to the man is that on his frenzied quest through daily life he loses his soul which is literally left behind. And thus he needs to sit down and wait for his soul to catch up with him eventually.

## 2.1. Losing your soul in the context of Lauren Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism"

As simple as this message may seem, the problem it portrays, in confrontation with the contemporary reality, touches upon a serious crisis of aspirational "dead-end," a danse macabre with our own being in life steeped in an inexhaustible reservoir of obligations. The question here is: how far can you go with tending to your treasured earthly attachments so as not to lose your soul? A timely commentary to this situation may be found in Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011: 39, emphasis added): "Change is an impact lived **on the body** before anything is understood, and as such is simultaneously meaningful and ineloquent." In *A Lost Soul* the soul has to literally walk out of the body to make the impact of this change —so ineloquent in its vividness— truly meaningful. What is it then that makes us so prone to addictive earthly attachments? Why do we sacrifice our souls in search for —well— for what exactly? Berlant (2011: 43) offers a timely explanation, which includes a crucial concept of human sovereignty marred by the delusion of optimism. All this, understandably, comes at a cost:

This means that the object of cruel optimism here appears as the thing within any object to which one passes one's fantasy of sovereignty for safekeeping. In cruel optimism the subject or community turns its treasured attachments into safety-deposit objects that make it possible to bear sovereignty through its distribution, the energy of feeling relational, general, reciprocal, and accumulative. In circulation one becomes happy in an ordinary, often lovely, way, because the weight of being in the world is being distributed into space, time, noise, and other beings. When one's sovereignty is delivered back into one's hands, though, its formerly

distributed weight becomes apparent, and the subject becomes stilled in a perverse mimesis of its enormity.

What may be perplexing is the question why we would share or distribute our sovereignty to any “space, time, noise, and other beings” but our soul? Why would our soul be inadequate as a safety deposit of our sovereignty? Does it evoke too high a degree of abstraction? Berlant (2011: 44) concedes:

[A]t a certain degree of abstraction both from trauma and optimism the sensual experience of self-dissolution, radically reshaped consciousness, new sensoria, and narrative rupture can look similar; the subject’s grasping toward stabilizing form, too, in the face of dissolution, looks like classic compensation, in which the production of habits that signify predictability defends against losing emotional shape entirely.

Through such modern concepts as Berlant’s *cruel optimism*, the body-soul relation has been revived again and both entities’ apparent distance or proximity have been occupying thoughts of contemporary writers.

Metaphysics of the soul is not the flagship motive in Tokarczuk’s fiction, for these are identified as: myth, archetype, space and time. Nevertheless, in a conversation with Kinga Dunin (2018), a sociologist and a writer herself, Olga Tokarczuk has revealed her fascination with the concept of the soul:

Tokarczuk: Also, I always meet my soul when I write.

Dunin: Do you really believe that people have souls?

Tokarczuk: As a metaphor—by all means. It’s a good old metaphor that has been enough for people for thousands of years. And biological sciences still have a problem answering the question what human consciousness is. It cannot be reduced to impulses of a certain organ. You can call it consciousness, but it’s still a hole in what we know, not filled by science. That is why, from time to time, ideas appear in psychology, say the more philosophical one, to bring the soul back to existence as a concept that perhaps might work in psychotherapy. Centuries-old tradition speaks for the soul and until we find something else, this concept speaks to people, they understand it. Consciousness, self-awareness, the eye that is watching us. What is soul? Maybe it is something that, nevertheless, goes beyond our organically founded psyche. Collective Awareness?

The author further admits that in her work she uses mainly metaphors. And, as in the case of *A Lost Soul*, in the metaphor of losing and finding the soul, everyone can find their own reflection.

## 2.2 Tokarczuk’s embodied metaphors in human soul-searching endeavours

Let us then return to *Flights* as a testing ground for Tokarczuk’s declaration about her fascination with the soul in the context of the author’s metaphoric sensitivity. In a general reception of the novel,

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the dominant interpretation is directed towards the issues related to the way of “being” on the road, whether physically or metaphorically (Hoffmann, 2019; Iwasiów, 2013; Larenta, 2014). For Barbara Trygar (2015: 18), it is the fusion of movement and change which constitutes the driving force for *Flights*’ characters: “Variability of the world, its development and geographical mobility of its entities, namely the factors specific to the modern—or postmodern—era, make reality a space of permanent change, a space in which mobility and ambiguity dominate stability, structure and unchanging signposts determining human existence.” Yet a careful reading of the novel reveals alternative interpretations, hinting at the concept discussed in the first part of this essay about a Socratic dialogue between the body and the soul, where the body acts as the insubordinate one, and, just like in Plato, it is a hindrance for the soul on its way to true knowledge. This theme is not new to Tokarczuk, who in 1995 released a novel called *E.E.* about a fifteen-year-old girl who evinces the powers of a medium. Inspired by Jung’s philosophy (Witkoś, 2009: 206), Tokarczuk encroached upon metaphysical enquiry parallel to the one from Plato’s dialogues. The axis of body-soul hierarchy leaves no room for speculation when we read in *E.E.* such statements as: “Fighting with a desire [...] only leads to the accumulation of contradictions that can drive [people] crazy” or “The human body only serves as a raft to cross the river of life” (Tokarczuk, [1995] 2015).

*Flights* is the novel which consists of a number of contradictions itself. To begin with, it is made of separate and unrelated stories which come and go, to be taken up again at the point when we are already immersed in another one (and there is no table of contents to refer to). This method of constantly changing focalizers has been described as multi-layered and multi-subjective (Kliś, 2011). Yet our focus here is not on the multilayeredness of structure, but rather on the duality of body and soul of some of the *Flights* characters. Just as in Plato’s dialogues, they are immersed in the Socratic method of conversation, but their dialogues are not meant for the outside world. They rather take the form of internalized quests for truth about their two-tier humanity consisting of body and soul. Granted, *Flights* is a book about human anatomy which leaves no doubt why the Nobel Academy awarded Tokarczuk “for a narrative imagination that with encyclopedic passion represents the crossing of boundaries as a form of life.” As an illustration, a truly Burkean description of a human heart sets out as an exercise in anatomy only to conclude as a specimen of the embodied metaphor:

The heart. All its mystery has been conclusively revealed—for it’s that unshapely lump the size of a fist, its colour a dirty brown. Please note that that is, in fact, the colour of our bodies: grayish brown, ugly. We would not want to have walls in our houses or a car that colour. It’s the colour of insides, of darkness [...] where matter hides in moisture from others’ gazes [...] (27).

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The “extravagance” of breaching the container of the body was only granted to blood. The foreclosure of the bodily form is emphasized by a sensorial depiction of blood in terms of its colour. Its redness activates our affective perception of blood as an “alarm that the casing of the body has been breached” and “that the continuity of the tissue has been broken” (27). In such a vivid presentation of a central human organ, the lower order ascribed to the body is made evident through the language evoking ugliness, shapelessness and, ultimately, shame.

### 2.3 Socratic dialogues with the body in *Flights*

The characters in *Flights* are constantly on the move. Kunicki is traversing the Croatian coast in search of his mysteriously missing wife and son; Eryk, instead of bringing his passengers safely to the shore, is steering his ferry away into the open sea; Dr Blau is travelling incessantly across the globe in search of the perfect formula for the plastination of human tissue; and Chopin’s sister is breaking the law by smuggling her brother’s heart across the borders from France and hiding it in a jar under her dress, so that it could be buried in his homeland, in Poland.

“Every traveller’s time is a lot of times in one” (59), but even our sense of time gets caught up in the bodily dynamics since it results from our “being biological individuals undergoing distinct and changing states” (178). Likewise, travelling gets conceptualized in the Platonic vein of the corporeal desire which serves primarily as a vehicle for “arousing in [human beings] an inclination towards something” (81) and lends to them movement and direction. Desire, however, “in itself is empty, in other words, it merely indicates direction, but never destination” (81). Therefore, the singular acts of traveling seem to be nothing more than saturating our bodily created desires, yet by no means is it ever possible to “attain a given destination, nor in so doing, appease desire” (81). The word which here, in Burke’s logic, can be borrowed from the realm of the corporeal, visible and tangible to be metaphorically applied to the realm of the incorporeal, invisible and intangible is the preposition *towards*. “Towards what?” asks one of Tokarczuk’s characters (81). And this is how the dynamics of the Socratic dialogue is activated in *Flights*.

There is one particular story through which I will attempt to track the affective adjustment to the characters’ unruly bodies against the fraying relation to their souls. This is the story of a famous 17<sup>th</sup> century anatomist, Filip Verheyden, a real person who is credited with identifying the Achilles tendon and publishing in 1693 a groundbreaking anatomical atlas *Corporis Humani Anatomia*. Throughout the story’s development, we track down a mysterious mechanism where the physical loss of a part of the body “appears to

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entail the loss of an entire world and therefore a loss of confidence about how to live on, even at the microlevel of bodily comportment” (Berlant, 2011: 16). A first striking observation is that the whole story of Verheyne is presented in one coherent piece, unlike most of other stories, cut into unpredictable chunks and scattered all over the book. Would there be a structural intention to stage the scientist’s descent into obsession with his amputated leg as a one coherent act, as if the climax of this particular drama should not by any means be missed? The story of the scientist’s life unfolds more or less chronologically, from his birth in 1648 and childhood in the countryside in Flanders, through his education in lyceum after his brain skills and drawing talents were discovered, and then studies of theology and anatomy, up to his profound scientific career as an anatomist and surgeon, finally as a rector at the University of Leuven.

The person who recounts these events, and, at the same time, engages in a philosophical dialogue with Verheyne’s slumping state of mind, is his former student, Willem van Horssen. The familiarity of his first name evokes the association with Willem Ragnarsson, a protagonist of Hanya Yanagihara’s 2016 novel *A Little Life*, who was also the closest friend to the main protagonist, Jude St Francis, troubled with the same bodily impairment—amputated leg, and the parallel mental breakdown ensuing partially from his corporeal disability. Even before Verheyne had his leg amputated at the age of twenty eight due to the infected injury on his calf, he was already interested in the intricacies of human anatomy, putting to practice the words of his master, “Mr Spinoza” as he called him, whom he would regularly visit as a young boy accompanying his pastor. The biographical details of “a brash Jew cursed out by his own” (198) and his trade as a grinder of lenses, leave no doubt that Verheyne grew up under the influence of Spinoza—a philosopher, whose contribution to the modern theories of affect (Tomkins, [1962] 2008; Massumi, 2015) is not accidental in the context of this particular story as well as the whole book. Thus Verheyne’s attention to detail and his fondness for microscopes might be traced back to his young age fascination with the philosopher, as he tried to “earnestly fulfil the recommendation of Mr Spinoza [...] to look at people as at lines, planes and bodies” (196). “Seeing, after all, is knowing” (188), but “you have to know how to look and you have to know what you’re looking at” (203).

That particular phrase gets an additional meaning in the context of the public dissection carried out by the most famous anatomist in the Netherlands, professor Frederik Ruysch, whose “theatrum” in Leiden was attended by a large crowd, including Verheyne and van Horssen. The sight of the body of a slender young woman that was skillfully opened by Ruysch, the body so delicate and so unlike other bodies of criminals or vagrants they would usually dissect, aroused



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a transcendent feeling, which van Horssen called “the truth of the body” (209). Suddenly, he felt an “odd conviction that despite the evidence of death, *despite the absence of the soul*, the body left to itself is a kind of intensive whole” (209, emphasis added). The way van Horssen saw that autopsy of a woman reversed “how” he looked at that process, which not only held off the imminence of death, but also “transformed the human essence into a body” (209). This feeling was so overwhelming that it defied the Platonic logic of the impure body, dragging the soul to the abyss of mortality. The woman’s body, which was two years old, but perfectly preserved in Ruysch’s secret formula, as well as the exhibition of fetus skeletons arranged in theatre-like scenes, spoke to van Horssen and other spectators with divine-like metaphors, so that they might experience the epiphany and eventually “discover” themselves (207). Here the logic was defeated and the mystery was undressed: “There’s nothing to be afraid of. We are a mechanism, something like Huygen’s clock” (209).

The final episode to be discussed here, which performs a mimetic reenactment of a Socratic dialogue, involves Verheyne’s amputated leg. The limb was severed by a student of Ruysch, who “took a meticulous care of the leg” (200), and, on Verheyne’s fervent plea, he placed it in a glass vessel filled with the balm of Nantes brandy to preserve it from destruction. This way the leg became Verheyne’s life-long companion, which “was now living its own life as a specimen, submerged in alcohol, in a perpetual haze, dreaming its own dreams of running, of wet morning grass, of warm sand on the beach” (201). On the one hand, the anatomist would cherish his severed body part, but, on the other hand, he would gradually fall into obsession, even madness, and, eventually, a fatal melancholy. The drive which at first would prompt him to dissect his own leg in search for new anatomic discoveries, turned into the obsessive compulsive behavior prompted by a physiological mystery of phantom pains which resided in the place of his amputated leg. And it was at that time when the phrase about his leg “living its own life” became real (210):

He would have the impression that his left leg was numb, and that he had to absolutely get it into the right position [...]. He wanted to move his toes, but the unperformability of that movement awoke him completely. [...] He would close his eyes and try to scratch [his leg], but he touched nothing, his fingers combed the void in despair, giving no relief to Verheyne.

Finally, he would try to grope for that painful place on his amputated limb, “but could not reach the pain” (211). Suspecting to have fallen to some “nervous illusion or madness” (212), Verheyne withdrew from his public duties and eventually fell into such delusional apathy that it seemed that “his brain had stopped working” (213).

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After Verheyne's death in 1711, van Horssen could not locate the limb in his friend's house. Instead, the family, who probably had got rid of the jarred curiosity, entrusted him with Verheyne's papers. They turned out to be the anatomist's letters to his amputated leg, written in the Socratic vein "to show the nature of that cause which has occupied [his] thoughts" (215):

In the *Letters to My Amputated Leg* Filip attempted to prove coherently and without emotion that since the body and soul are in essence one and the same, since they are two attributes of an infinite, all-encompassing God, there must be between them some sort of proportionality designed by the Creator. *Totam naturam unum esse individuum.*

The questions which he asked demonstrated the potentiality of body-soul communion, if only he was given the answers "in what way do such distinct substances as the body and the soul connect in the human body and act upon one another?" or "in what way can the body, occupying space, establish causal contact with a soul that occupies no space?" (215). Instead, though, the only response he would get from his body was the phantom pain: "The thing that hurts does not exist" (216). Along with that, the properties of the body moved from the realm of the corporeal, visible and tangible to the provinces of the incorporeal, invisible and intangible reserved by Plato for the divine and immortal soul.

### 3. Conclusion

In his letters, Verheyne crossed the ontological boundaries and indulged in a dialogue with his amputated leg. Writing letters to his severed bodily part was meant to bring relief at least to his soul, if the body was irresponsive. His letters might be called a travelogue into his mind, where a dialectic method mastered by Socrates in Plato's dialogues should have allowed the anatomist to overcome his bodily depression and a default narrative of pain. His Platonic "desire to beget through enquiry" through "seeking for knowledge" rather than for "provisions for answers" (Rhees and Phillips, 2004: xii), left a perplexing route on the contemplative map of his dual pain—the one of the body and the one of the soul. Most significantly, like any protagonist of Plato's dialogues, whose dialectic mode became a habit of the inquisitive mind, Verheyne asks first his body, then himself, and, finally, he asks us, a fundamental question: "what have I been looking for?" The anatomist's story in *Flights* vividly demonstrates Olga Tokarczuk's mastery of unobtrusive, yet lively and expressive philosophical framing of a complex relation of body and soul through their shifting proximities. Tokarczuk projects great sensitivity to both Plato's dialectic method in the form of the dialogical relationship between a character and his body, and the philosopher's conviction expressed in *Phaedo* that the bodily imperfection acts as a self-

destructive enclosure for the pure, unseen and divine soul. A more contemporary reference to Kenneth Burke's theory of metaphor as a perspective, tinged with Berlant's cruel optimism, locates Tokarczuk's embodied ontology of the soul at the crossroads of life and death. In such ethereal ambience, whatever belongs to the corporeal, entails the inevitable destruction of the intangible and harmonious human substance.

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