

# From Sensation to Empathy



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In the wake of Olga Tokarczuk’s Nobel lecture, the word *czułość* “tenderness,” which refers to a very intimate sort of relation, has become something of a public commodity in Poland. As she put it: “tenderness is the art of personifying, of sharing feelings, and thus endlessly discovering similarities. (...) Tenderness is the most modest form of love. It is the kind of love that does not appear in the scriptures or the gospels, no one swears by it, no one cites it. It has no special emblems or symbols, nor does it lead to crime, or prompt envy. It appears wherever we take a close and careful look at another being, at something that is not our ‘self.’”<sup>1</sup> *Czułość* “tenderness” is expressed in gestures, glances, words that attest to our good feelings and intentions, that attest to – as the Nobel Prize winner put it – our taking a close and careful look at another person. It is essential for many of us (and for some even more important than love), without it relations would be deprived of what constitutes their essence: perceiving another person.

What, then, is this *czułość* “tenderness”? The noun describes the abstract property referred to by the adjective *czuły* “sensitive, tender.” Historically speaking, that adjective is a certain type of past participle that is

no longer productive today, which refers to the entity that performed a given action, experienced a given mental state, etc. Analogous forms that have survived in contemporary Polish include the adjective *stały* “stable” from the verb *stać* “to stand” and also *były* “former” from *być* “to be.” *Czuły*, originally from the verb *czuć* “to feel, sense,” therefore originally meant “one who feels/senses,” but it eventually became lexicalized as referring to someone treating another person with love and kindness. The noun *czułość* can be used to describe such relations only when they involve the ability to tune into the emotional states of others, or – as a dictionary of Polish from the early twentieth century put it – “the capacity to receive external and internal impressions” (indeed, such a meaning of both the adjective *czuły* and noun *czułość*, referring to physical sensation, still functions in modern Polish).

*Czułość* “tenderness” does not generally appear in Polish speeches, press articles, or essays – many authors instead prefer to use the word *empatia* “empathy,” which refers to a similar phenomenon and invokes similar associations (taking its source from the Greek *páthos*, “sensation, feeling”). For Tokarczuk’s generation, however, *empatia* belongs to the world of science, of public commentary, whereas *czułość* invokes a certain kind of intimacy – it relates to the kind of closeness that is necessary for love to be possible, and also – as Tokarczuk argues – for literature to be possible. ■

<sup>1</sup> English trans. Jennifer Croft and Antonia Lloyd-Jones, www.nobelprize.org. © The Nobel Foundation 2019.



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