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“What sort of a world is this, where killing and pain are the norm? What on earth is wrong with us?” Nature Strikes Back in Olga Tokarczuk’s *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* (2009)

Abstract

The article seeks to explore the theme of nature’s revenge in Olga Tokarczuk’s novel *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* (2009, translated into English in 2018). The book may be classified as Anthropocene fiction or eco-fiction. Tokarczuk’s treatment of vengeful nature in *Drive Your Plow ...* manifests as a literary representation of a physiology of an ecosystem in disequilibrium, pervaded by images of blood in a snowy landscape. The author renders her female protagonist, Janina Duszejko, a proponent and practitioner of a theory proposing that nature wreaks revenge on humans. Tokarczuk presents new ways of imagining agency beyond anthropocentrism. *Drive Your Plow* may serve as an example of literary fiction from which posthumanist reflections may spring, while simultaneously it oftentimes (even if unintentionally) draws on posthumanist philosophy and ethics. I also refer to Olga Tokarczuk biography and views in search of her environmental concerns and solutions.

Keywords: Olga Tokarczuk, eco-fiction, posthumanism, the Anthropocene, anthropocentrism

The Anthropocene, or “the world is out of joint”

Anthropogenic changes threaten climatic¹ and biogeochemical stability on a planetary scale (Gillings and Hagan-Lawson 2014). Unfortunately, not only one species, *Homo sapiens*, the agent and vector of

1 Literally, the term “climatic change” appears in Tokarczuk’s eco-crime thriller twice. In the first mention (the second chapter of the book), the reader is informed by the main protagonist and first-person narrator, Janina Duszejko that: “Recent climatic changes have made everything warmer; but not our Plateau” (Tokarczuk 2020b: 32). The next mention comes up in

these changes, suffers the harmful and negative consequences of its own environmentally destructive behaviour. Animal existence in the Anthropocene² is marked by additional pain, suffering, and anxiety, which means that natural environmental stressors (e.g. chronic food shortage, high temperatures, or oxidation) are accompanied by anthropogenic stressors. Human activities such as pollutant exposure, introduction of non-native species, release of greenhouse gases and aerosols to the atmosphere alter the immune systems of wild animals, in many cases causing stress and diseases (Martin *et al.* 2010). Furthermore, domesticated animals and animals living in captivity are prone to develop mental illness (Dasgupta 2005). In consequence, animal welfare has been largely affected by total human ecological footprint³ and anthropopressure.

In a world where speciesism⁴ still pervades human cultures, where non-human animals are notoriously “banished” from their habitats for existing (co-existing) in the same physical world at the same time, they may find “shelter” in peculiar and animal-friendly spaces, i.e. in literature. This realm is capacious enough to house non-human animals and human animals. The cartography of literature allows writers to create borderless worlds, contrary to conventional maps, where one finds a nonstretchable body of the globe. Many writers invite non-human animals, dwelling in the limited earthly kingdom of animals, to its imaginary equivalent. As Olga Tokarczuk said in her Nobel lecture in 2019: “literature has miraculously preserved its right to all sorts of eccentricities, phantasmagoria, provocation, parody and lunacy. I dream of high viewing points and wide perspectives, where the context goes far beyond what we might have expected” (Tokarczuk 2019a: 20–21). She also proposed a concept of a tender narrator (Tokarczuk 2019a: 2). Tokarczuk, whom I perceive as an embodiment of the figure of a tender narrator, explained that it is “a perspective from where everything can be seen. Seeing everything means recognizing the ultimate fact that all things that exist are mutually connected into a single whole, even if the connections between them are not yet known to us” (Tokarczuk 2019a: 21). In *Drive Your Plow...* Tokarczuk remains hidden as a tender narrator and endows her “literary daughter” or her alter ego—Janina Duszejko—with some features of such tender narrator like: sensitivity, ability to perceive reality in terms of a great web of mutual relations or transgress speciesism and appreciate animals’ existence with their experience of sensing the world (instead of viewing the world).

a conversation between the narrator and an old man—“the Gentleman with the Poodle”—when he shares her theory that non-human animals might have punished their oppressors: “I don’t think this is to do with a single killer animal, but animals in general. Perhaps thanks to climatic changes they’ve become aggressive, even deer and hares. And now they’re taking vengeance for everything” (Tokarczuk 2020b: 180).

- 2 The term was first popularized by Paul J. Crutzen in a 2002 paper he published in *Nature*. He suggested his own date for the beginning of the epoch—the invention of the steam engine in the late-eighteenth century. According to Crutzen, the Earth left the Holocene, and humans have entered a new geological epoch—the Anthropocene (Zalasiewicz *et al.* 2008).
- 3 The term “ecological footprint” was introduced by William Rees in 1990s. It has been used to describe various types of human impacts on Earth’s ecosystems measured in terms of the area of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems required to produce the goods consumed by a population and to assimilate the wastes generated (Wackernagel and Rees 1995).
- 4 Human relationships with animals have been called “speciesist”. The idea that non-human animals are inferior because they do not belong to the “right” species was introduced by Richard Ryder in the 1970s to draw a parallel with other forms of unjustified discrimination (e.g. racism or sexism). The term was popularized by Peter Singer, who claims that speciesism is ‘a prejudice or bias in favour of the interests of members of one’s own species and against those of members of other species’ (Singer 1975: 6). Speciesism is rooted in humanist notion of subjectivity. It justifies disadvantageous treatment or consideration of those who are not members of *Homo sapiens*, and therefore may be treated as objects.

Availing herself of one of the topos belonging to eco-fiction, namely nature striking back, in *Drive Your Plow...* Tokarczuk confronts the reader with: consequences of prevailing anthropocentrism and speciesism, suffering of non-human animals in the Anthropocene, environmental crisis, anthropogenic climate change, and urgency for action on ecological and environmental matters. Duszejko—for whom within the plot Tokarczuk develops a theory of vengeful nature—with all her posthumanist traits, serves as an agent causing change in the name of non-human animals. Duszejko’s double “instrumental” function is exposed within the novel’s narrative (being an agent of nature) as well as on a metanarrative level (being “a ventriloquist” who expresses Tokarczuk’s concerns). On a deeper level, a non-anthropocentric concept of human agency is narrated to re-imagine humans as part of nature, whose separateness from non-human animals stems from traditional humanist thinking. Disconnection from nature also results from a mediated contact with it, namely through linguistic concepts and cultural discourses—as Kate Rigby puts it: “culture constructs the prism through which we know nature” (154). To be aware of that is to raise one’s consciousness about—on the one hand—the cultural nature of nature, its symbolic and representational narrowing comprehension, while on the other—about its real presence and existence, beyond words, symbols and numbers. Although creating another narrative about nature turns it into a literary fiction, Olga Tokarczuk rejects instrumentalizing, colonizing and imprisoning nature through/within language. The reader gets an impression that the author speaks the language of infuriated nature, as if she expressed nature’s need to be heard and empowered by means of literature, as if Tokarczuk has written down wrathful nature’s warning for humanity, as if Tokarczuk was constantly reminding us about nature’s actuality and materiality.

In addition, Tokarczuk’s eco-fiction is an invitation to set in motion a new way of thinking—to awaken a posthumanist instinct in readers: to reflect upon humanity’s inseparability from nature, the concept of a human being, agency beyond anthropocentrism, human and non-human interconnectivity and co-dependence,⁵ and the Anthropocene. I will demonstrate how Tokarczuk’s intuitive knowledge of posthumanist assumptions contributes to thinking against the grain. I suggest that Tokarczuk’s eco-fiction captures the essence of posthumanism. As an umbrella term encompassing a diversity of approaches, its common denominator:

[...] is a break with a pervasive, if often unacknowledged, assumption: that humanity is somehow separate from the rest of the universe and constitutes a center for orientation—a basic set of measures, values, and points of views—from which no judgment can escape, whether pertaining to science, philosophy, politics, or everyday practices. (Thomsen, Wamberg, 2020: 1)

To make the reader think against the grain, the author of *Drive Your Plow...* creates Janina Duszejko, a cultural figure of a repairer, a peculiar individual with a cause, a human being who will not shrink from committing transgressive and controversial deeds as nature’s wrecker, a creature who acts on behalf of the

5 Tokarczuk’s enthusiasm for the concept of a dynamic mycelium-like reality and community devoid of pyramid-like relationships springs from her interest in Jungian psychology, astrology, mythologies and mysticism. In her prose, people, animals and things are interconnected and interdependent. They compose a web of influences, which escapes peoples’ attention, especially those who grew up in self-centred culture, celebrating individualism, perpetuating ego-oriented values and practices. It is uncommon to contemporary westerners to think in terms of a planetary community, caring co-existence with non-human entities, to think in a non-anthropocentric way like Tokarczuk does: “Tenderness perceives the bonds that connect us, the similarities and sameness between us. It is a way of looking that shows the world as being alive, living, interconnected, cooperating with, and codependent on itself” (Nobel Lecture 2019a: 24).

voiceless and powerless, a self-proclaimed “chosen one” with no claims to recognition or gratitude. She is also a narrator/focalizer, who dares to ask: “What sort of a world is this, where killing and pain are the norm: What on earth is wrong with us?” (Tokarczuk 2020b: 114).

Janina Duszejko’s posthumanist traits

Olga Tokarczuk endows her main character, a retired bridge engineer turned schoolteacher, a passionate amateur astrologer, a fan of weather channels, with an interest for Blake’s poetry and philosophy.⁶ She becomes a supporter of Blake’s organic idea of the world where everything is connected to everything else as well as his cosmological view based on interdependence of all beings. Not only does Duszejko translate fragments of his poetry or cite him, but she also cultivates the idea of a healthy relationship with nature, devoid of human superiority as if she knew the fundamental premises of posthumanist thought. Posthumanist approaches challenge the ontology of a human by questioning their separateness from nature. Posthumanism promotes relational and processual ontologies that accentuate entanglement of humans and nonhumans and humanity’s embeddedness in nature. It aims at dethroning and reconceptualizing a humanist idea of the (hu)man understood as a sovereign, autonomous and rational agent. According to the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia*:

Posthumanist philosophy constitutes the human as: (a) physically, chemically, and biologically enmeshed and dependent on the environment; (b) moved to action through interactions that generate affects, habits, and reason; and (c) possessing no attribute that is uniquely human but is instead made up of a larger evolving ecosystem. (Keeling, Lehman, 2018)

Tokarczuk’s literary creation is a representation of an ecologically conscious human being. Tokarczuk admits in an interview that Duszejko is a type of Elizabeth Costello, the title character of J.M. Coetzee’s novel (2003). Furthermore, Leonora Carrington’s *The Hearing Trumpet* (1976) served as an inspiration for *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*. Duszejko in many ways resembles Carrington’s 92-year-old narrator. The author informs us that Duszejko stems from her own literary female characters like Florentynka from *Primeval and Other Times* or Parka from *The Last Stories* (2004) (Tokarczuk 2009). The writer highlights the potential in the figure of an older lady, marginalized by society.

Duszejko, the owner of two dogs, builds a positive and caring human-animal relationship with her Little Girls, as she anthropomorphically refers to them. The protagonist feels a sense of kinship with her dogs, which takes the form of an interspecies community of sisterhood. In a dialogue with a priest, Father Rustle, the narrator unburdens herself to him about the loss of her dogs, who were missing: “They were my only loved ones. My family. My daughters” (Tokarczuk 2020b: 233). Far from finding consolation, Duszejko-the blasphemer is admonished: “It’s wrong to treat animals as if they were people. [...] God gave animals a lower rank, in the service of man” (Tokarczuk 2020b: 233). The reader finds out about their presence in Duszejko’s “herstory”⁷ from several memories and imagined encounters with her Little Girls,

6 Tokarczuk is a sophisticated literary borrower. She owes the title of the novel to William Blake’s poem “Proverbs of Hell”; follows the Blakeian capitalisation of selected words such as Darkness, Ailments, Anger, to name a few; precedes each chapter with a quote taken from his poetry.

7 The term was introduced by the second wave feminists of the 1970s to signify stories written and told by women, to accentuate the role of women in creating history, and to compensate for neglected or underappreciated achievements of women

scattered on the pages of *Drive Your Plow*. In one of her dreams, Little Girls give birth to “a completely new race of people brought forth by Animals. They were still blind—they hadn’t yet opened their eyes” (Tokarczuk 2020b: 221). The dream may be deciphered as Duszejko’s expression of a subconscious wish for interspecies posthumanity, which may be an aspect of the broader phenomenon—nature striking back on humanity for rampant anthropocentrism and its devastating aftermath.

Tenderness and willingness to learn something from non-human animals characterize Duszejko’s attitude towards her dogs (“They taught me quite basic, plain and simple justice”) (Tokarczuk 2020b: 102). She is haunted by their presence, their “enquiring gazes, their furrowed brows, their smiles” (Tokarczuk 2020b: 45), their “welcoming rituals” (Tokarczuk 2020b: 45), “their joy” (Tokarczuk 2020b: 70), “their games that involved playing tricks on each other” (Tokarczuk 2020b: 202). The woman detects with her posthumanist sensitivity a new quality of how animals are experiencing the world, or rather sensing the world, which—according to her—is in many ways deeper than human experience: “We have a view of the world, but Animals have a sense of the world [...]” (Tokarczuk 2020b: 102). Rendering animals’ perception of the world rooted in the senses, Tokarczuk juxtaposes their experience of reality with human worldview, simultaneously offering a posthumanist insight into non-human animal’s world. Both modes of being are valuable and specific for each species since no single perspective can be regarded as a complete one.

The Polish writer seems to be familiar with a posthumanist notion of thinking beyond binarisms like people versus animals, mind versus body. Tokarczuk decenters the human as the center of orientation—the measure of everything in the universe. To demonstrate the continuum of different experiences of the world, the writer creates a new word in Polish—“światoczucie”. It is translated into English as “a sense of the world”, yet the translation does not reflect its potential, or it is somehow lost in translation. Analogically to how “worldview” (“światopogląd” in Polish) is constructed, a neologism ‘światoczucie’ consists of two, melted words: “world” (in Polish: “świat”) and “sensing” (in Polish: “czucie”). “Worldsensing” would be a literal translation.

Both, Duszejko’s ecofriendly practices (a vegetarian and a self-proclaimed animal rights activist) and eccentric lifestyle (an astrologer, a non-conformist single) stigmatize her among the local community that adheres to patriarchal, conservative, and catholic values. It seems that the latter work as empathy-blockers or anaesthetics for moral reasoning, in metaphorical sense of these words. Deeply engrained within this small society’s worldview are sexism and speciesism. They operate on many levels, including individual behaviour and collective practices (one may think that Tokarczuk wrote nonfiction). The Plateau’s local community, the male elite (the Commandant, Innerd, the President, and Father Rustle), and its cohorts in particular, specializes in sexist and speciesist practices. In their ontology, both women and animals function as subalterns, objects of lesser value and importance, disempowered and discriminated. This fraternity cultivates a masculine ethos of exploitation, veiled in patriotic, ethical and theological language. In a local church they are referred to as “brave hunters” and followers of Saint Hubert (Tokarczuk 2020b: 237).⁸ On hearing an oration by the local priest, chaplain to the town’s hunting club, one might get an impression that hunters are significant guardians and caretakers of nature. Ties of

in different cultures throughout the history of the world. When it comes to literature, the story is told from a perspective of a female narrator to emphasize women’s experience and erasure of women from man-made history.

8 Paradoxically, the legendary Hubertus was converted by a miraculous vision of a speaking crucifix between the antlers of a stag at bay, ceased to kill animals and subsequently became a bishop.

brotherhood are renewed each time they meet in their club to kill animals for sport, either “within the law” (Tokarczuk 2020b: 73) or secretly. To join the association, one obviously has to be a man with an avidity for hunting and mechanistic approach to animals. To shoot an animal from above the ground, from a hiding place, they use cross-shaped wooden platforms called pulpits (named after an elevated platform used in churches to give prominence to a person standing on it). Indeed, the place where action is set, abounds in pulpits and its male users.

Symbolically, pulpits may represent a hierarchy of beings with a human over animals, plants, and inanimate matter. Rosi Braidotti claims that the construction of the so called universal human referred to “masculine, white, urbanized, speaking a standard language, heterosexually inscribed in a reproductive unit and a full citizen” (Braidotti 2013: 65), which makes him (a gendered human being) exceptionally exceptional. Tokarczuk’s depiction of scraps of land dotted with pulpits is modelled on how a Polish landscape looks like when one decides to enter and visit Polish forest areas – here “killing and and pain are the norm” (Tokarczuk 2020b: 114). For Duszejko, pulpits also have a symbolic meaning: “Now it seemed clear to me why those hunting towers, which do after all bear a strong resemblance to the watchtowers in concentration camps, are called ‘pulpits.’ In a pulpit Man places himself above other Creatures and grants himself to their life and death” (Tokarczuk 2020b: 239). On animal’s behalf the woman overturns and destroys hunting pulpits; gathers non-human remains (for example of a Tomcat, a She-Cat, a Fox, Moles, a Deer, to name a few by the names Duszejko gives them), buries them in a special graveyard by the house and lays a stone on each grave as if the buried ones were human. Duszejko’s mindset is permeated by posthumanist thinking transgressing anthropocentric and speciecist categorization.

Imagining agency beyond anthropocentrism

Eco-fiction offers many literary strategies, means of unfolding a story and thematic focuses, one of which is a topos of nature wreaking revenge on humanity. Olga Tokarczuk’s eco-thriller unmasks anthropocentric, violent practices towards animals (hunting, industrialized farming, maltreatment of domestic animals, objectification of non-human beings) and shows their disastrous face for non-human beings. The action takes place in wintertime, on the Plateau, a remote village in Poland, where human beings kill non-human beings, which in turn (as the plot suggests) provokes them to take revenge. That nature enacts revenge in the form of a series of murders on the humans who abused, exploited and slaughtered them, is a theory proposed by Tokarczuk, who makes Janina Duszejko investigate on her own. Her theory unveils along with unfolding of the plot. Paradoxical as it may seem, by creating a human agent, a heroine, who rejects traditional humanist worldview and acts on behalf of nature, Tokarczuk shows new ways of imagining agency beyond anthropocentrism.

A bloody tale of nature rising up begins with... choking on an innocent animal’s bone. Duszejko’s obnoxious neighbour, Big Foot,⁹ a poacher – compared by her to a little goblin nurtured by the forest (Tokarczuk 2020b: 19) – is found dead in his own house. The woman is alarmed by the trusted neighbour, Oddball, and they decide to pay a visit to their deceased neighbour. Before they enter his house, they

9 The narrator has a tendency to christen her acquaintances according to their characteristic features or profession—Oddball, Dizzy, Good News, Black Coat, Father Rustle, The Writer.

encounter two calmly staring, unshy deer¹⁰ “in the middle of performing a ritual whose meaning we couldn’t fathom” (Tokarczuk 2020b: 16). Next, as they dress the corpse – that once was a devilish creature with long and narrow feet (Tokarczuk 2020b: 22) – in his best clothes, they find out that he choked on a shard of bone from a deer¹¹ he killed. It seems as if his prey that was turned into meat, “counterattacked”:

He had caught the Deer in a snare, killed her, then butchered, roasted and eaten her body. One Creature had devoured another in the silence and stillness of the Night. Nobody had protested, no thunderbolt had struck. And yet Punishment had come upon the devil, though no one’s hand had guided death. (Tokarczuk 2020: 26)

This is where and how Tokarczuk’s/Duszejko’s theory of vengeful nature originates. Very soon the protagonist verbalizes it in the following, compressed form: “Vengeance from beyond the grave” (Tokarczuk 2020b: 51). As the plot unfolds, the reader learns that four kinds of non-human animals are involved in avenging murders of other animals, namely: deer, foxes, beetles and maggots.

In quick succession a wave of crimes hits the hamlet for the benefit of the ecosystem and nature. It demands “a pound of flesh” and comes for it; remains unsatisfied until the most significant chessmen are eliminated from the chessboard. Literally, four men turn into pounds of flesh. The first “attack of nature” is on the police commandant, who is found lying in a well with his feet up and head down, covered in blood with his eyes open (Tokarczuk 2020b: 83). Since the footprints of deer hooves surround the well, Duszejko puts forward her theory about vengeful nature and she adds: “Animals are strong and wise. We don’t realize how clever they are. There was a time when Animals were tried in court. Some were even convicted” (Tokarczuk 2020b: 84).¹² Tokarczuk introduces Duszejko’s contrasting attitude towards animals to re-think the relations between humans and non-humans in the Anthropocene. The writer embeds critical potential in *Drive Your Plow* both by proposing Duszejko’s theory of nature striking back and by “checking” other character’s responses to it.

In a conversation with Tokarczuk, the interviewee argues that in *Drive Your Plow...* the author prophesizes nature’s revenge on the human race. The Polish writer admits that the book is apocalyptic in some way, even though the great cataclysm has been engendered and nourished in the mind of someone who is not taken seriously (Tokarczuk 2009). The writer weaves the tale of nature striking back around a conviction that those who harm nature in general, and non-human animals in particular, deserve to be punished. Tokarczuk needs a female protagonist who could voice this concern, a self-proclaimed animal rights activist. Her female protagonist refers to the animals’ capacity to suffer and feel pain and fear—emotional states shared with all humans: “When you kill them, and they die in Fear and Terror [...] you doom them to hell, and the whole world changes into hell” (Tokarczuk 2020b: 114). Hunting is like “shooting at defenceless people” (Tokarczuk 2020b: 109).

10 Duszejko refers to deer as Young Ladies and animals are ‘gentled’ by nicknaming.

11 The remains of the murdered animal—the deer’s head and trotters—are collected with care by Duszejko.

12 The next “debtor to nature”, Innerd, turns out to be a local, wealthy fox farmer and brothel owner, caught in an animal snare. After him comes the president of the Mushroom Pickers’ Society, who is found covered by beetles. Meanwhile rumours start to spread in Duszejko’s vicinity. People fantasize about a killer-beast stalking the neighbourhood (Tokarczuk 2020b: 179). Alternatively, a theory that people in power eliminate each other occupies the more reasonable minds (Tokarczuk 2020b: 228). Last (but not least) on nature’s death-list is a priest, Father Rustle, who is killed in a fire after celebrating a mass in honour of Hubertus.

For Tokarczuk/Duszejko, the sense of justice pertains to all harmed non-human living creatures, yet they are handicapped because they cannot make effective representation in the human socio-cultural reality. Systematic abuse of animals cries out for vengeance. Witnessing their exploitation and expiration, seeing their killed bodies, observing their daily rituals being ruined by humans, she finds kinship with non-human animals, and they matter to her profoundly. Paradoxically, the silenced protagonist finds courage and becomes a spokesperson for non-human animals, for the voiceless. Taking advantage from her own social insignificance and “cultural aphonia” caused by oppressive patterns, Duszejko empowers herself verbally. It emanates from this repressed part of her femininity that was rarely allowed to speak and express ideas to be taken seriously. The protagonist takes action to protect animals or even to save their lives as she attempts to foil hunting. Her desperately raised voice accentuates a significant message for the local hunters: “You’ve no right to shoot at living Creatures” (Tokarczuk 2020b: 72).

The reader follows the narrator’s first-person account of murderous deeds to find out that the narrator turns out to be nature’s, and therefore the animals’ agent, seeking vengeance and inflicting punishment. “I was their Tool” (Tokarczuk 2020b: 262) – as Duszejko names the uncanny experience of being an instrument of change. The narrator hides the truth about her “mission” till the climactic ending of the story, until she explains to her friends that:

They [animals] chose me from among others – maybe because I don’t eat meat and they can sense it – to continue to act in their Name. They appeared before me, like the Stag to Saint Hubert, to have me become the punitive hand of justice, in secret. Not just for the Deer, but for other Animals too. For they have no voice in parliament. They even gave me a Weapon, a very clever one. Nobody guessed a thing. (Tokarczuk 2020b: 251)

Duszejko’s weapon consisted in a carrier bag, (frozen) deer’s head and its trotters. She is well prepared to perform her role of an avenger since she practiced hammer throwing (and won several medals in her youth). Filled with anger, her body knew how to hit precisely in order to knock out the opponent and never let him return to his senses. No man has any chances of survival when confronted with Duszejko’s attack of “divine Wrath” (Tokarczuk 2020b: 112).

Her vendetta is two-fold in nature. First, it is personal – blistering rage harboured for months for killing her beloved Little Girls until she finds out that the local hunting club killed them. In her pursuit of truth, it finally materializes in form of a photograph she saw in Big Foot’s house. In the picture, among the trophies of the hunt, neatly arranged in a row, Duszejko recognizes her Little Girls. The Commandant, Innerd, the President, and Father Rustle were among those who committed “the Crime” (Tokarczuk 2020b: 249). Second, her own drama of revenge was combined with a larger project of nature’s uprising against the devilish humans and abominable tormentors of animals. The woman compared herself to “Bellona or Medea” (Tokarczuk 2020b: 258), two mythological female figures (the Roman goddess of war and the Greek semi-goddess) associated with women’s agency driven by anger and revenge. Hence *Drive Your Plow* may be also interpreted as “herstory” of an individual on the animal crusade in a nutshell.

Righteous anger

In *Drive Your Plow...* Tokarczuk designs and implements a new way of imagining nature’s agency and revenge in Polish literature. Nature wreaking revenge is initiated by a human being, whose perception

of oneself and the world transgresses a limited dichotomy of nature versus humans. Tokarczuk turns a gendered human being into a non-human animal's agentic “tool”, driven by “divine anger”. For the majority of male characters this “tool” is rather a fool.

According to Agnieszka Holland,¹³ Tokarczuk's book “is the story of the anger growing in those who are voiceless and powerless, which is quite a universal story today actually” (Holland 2018). The protagonist's voice from the periphery of culture is not treated seriously by the local authorities. The voiceless and the powerless in *Drive Your Plow* are represented both by humans and nonhumans. Tokarczuk's literary creation engages in an eco-battle against the patriarchal treatment of women and animals. Her confrontations with the system can serve as images of existing, current struggles with oppressive mechanism of many patriarchal societies, including Polish. Not surprisingly, then, Duszejko's letters do not meet with response as she is ignored by the police, and later by the city guards. Another example of the narrator's cultural impotence (some female readers can identify with this form of discrimination) is her meeting with a forester, who treats her in a patronizing manner, mansplaining how nature cannot be left without human intervention and protection. His declaration that: “There's nothing natural about nature any more” (Tokarczuk 2020b: 195) resembles a mantra repeated by one of the officials, servants of the petrified anthropocentric system.

Tokarczuk's protagonist represents an archetypal figure of a New Age oracle, a female solitudinarian, a sensitive receiver equipped by nature with “the gift of the Clarity of Vision” (Tokarczuk 2020b: 31). The writer proposes that it is restored by anger, and “anyone who feels Anger, and does not take action, merely spreads the infection. So says our Blake” (Tokarczuk 2020b: 55). Anger becomes Duszejko's *sine qua non* for wreaking vengeance on those who kill the innocent: “Anger makes the mind clear and incisive, able to see more. It sweeps up the other emotions and takes control of the body. Without a doubt Anger is the source of all wisdom, for Anger has the power to exceed any limits” (Tokarczuk 2020b: 27).

In one of Duszejko's states of clarity when revelation flashes upon her, the woman faces the system, to which she is unimportant and useless. In her outburst of accusations against mankind's relentless maltreatment and abuse of animals, at the moment of exposing the revelation to the audience at the City Guard post, the woman is just a notorious petitioner, a harmless madwoman to be sent away empty-handed. She is a lone voice in the wilderness as she says:

What sort of a world is this? Someone's body is made into shoes, into meatballs, sausages, a bedside rug, someone's bones are boiled to make broth. Shoes, sofas, a shoulder bag made of someone's belly, keeping warm with someone else's fur, eating someone's body cutting it into bits and frying it in oil. Can it really be true? Is this nightmare really happening? This mass killing, cruel, impassive, automatic, without any pangs of conscience, without the slightest pause for thought, though plenty of thought is applied to ingenious philosophies and theologies. **What sort of a world is this, where killing and and pain are the norm: What on earth is wrong with us?** (Tokarczuk 2020b: 114 [emphasis by M.S.])

The guards remain ignorant, to them Duszejko represents an emotionally-driven weirdo. Her eco-tenderness is perceived as her obsession or a sign of unhealthy love towards non-human animals.¹⁴

13 In 2017 Holland made a film adaptation of Tokarczuk's *Drive Your Plow...* and entitled it *Spoor*.

14 Interestingly enough, Duszejko will find few male interlocutors with their ears open to the idea that animals could be the perpetrators of murders: a man with a poodle agrees with her and later on he will purport the theory of animal revenge on humankind; a local doctor from the Middle East, who treats her ailments with mixtures that look startlingly and smell

In an interview Tokarczuk explains the origins of the female protagonists' "divine anger"¹⁵:

Duszejko, as a pure and innocent person, cannot abide in a world that is sinister, aggressive, terrible, cruel, and sometimes macabre. So the only emotion that is born in a holy person is anger. Anger is not a bad energy. In Polish, we have a phrase that translates to "divine anger," "righteous anger." When someone is righteously angry, we know that the situation has surpassed the tolerated limits, the human norms. This book describes a situation like that. The macabre of killing is a matter of course happening around us, so the only way to behave justly is the "divine anger" that inundates Janina Duszejko. (Tokarczuk 2020a)

Tokarczuk seems to exploit a long tradition of cultural disapproval or even repression of anger in women by giving her female avenger traits of an unconventional femininity: agency, unruliness and rebelliousness.¹⁶ Righteous anger is presented in the novel as a motivating force, triggering action on behalf of nature and non-human animals.

It is possible to connect Duszejko's "divine anger" with a larger project of nature's "divine retribution". In *Drive Your Plow...* nature's revenge may be interpreted as a form of nemesis, falling on anthropocentric and patriarchal culture as a series of punishments for male domination, for nature's oppression, exploitation and destruction, analogous to cultural subjugation and abuse of women. In Tokarczuk's novel nature's responds in anger to raise mass consciousness about environmental damages caused by humanity that has interfered with nature's equilibrium, here with a scrap of it—the Plateau. James Lovelock's "Gaia hypothesis" (proposed in the 1970s) is partly useful at this point as he suggested that the Earth acts like a single organism seeking homeostasis, working on the principle that humans

shockingly; an eccentric dentist with an addiction to alcohol, who illegally pulls teeth *en plein-air*; and an entomologist and taphonomist, who visits the Plateau to study a rare species of flat bark beetle—men existing on the fringe of culture, semi-outcasts.

- 15 In the novel, the mechanism of "divine anger" follows a certain pattern: it appears as sudden surges, experienced as fire within. It temporarily makes the narrator physically stronger. After each attack the woman was exhausted and felt void inside. It attracted sorrows of different kinds. A watery ending was the result of the surge of anger. Weeping, the most troublesome of Duszejko's ailments (Tokarczuk 2020b: 154), followed each surge of fire energy. Her anger accompanied by tears signaled that the emotional state reached its peak—its cathartic phase. At this stage a tetradic emotional symphony composed of suffering (turned into) anger (transformed into) action (turned into) weeping was over.
- 16 According to Olga Tokarczuk, there is a long tradition of gendering anger—female anger is almost forbidden; it is demonized and criticized. In contrast, male anger is not only accepted, but even cherished. The writer admits that she realized such dualism with respect to cultural perception of anger is strongly rooted in Western culture when some readers of *Drive Your Plow* could not cope with or even bear the fact that the main protagonist is empowered by anger and her rebellion was considered as pathetic (Tokarczuk 2020c). In Western tradition, cultural perception of anger makes a distinction between male anger, which is generally valorized positively, and female anger stereotypically interpreted as uncontrollable fury, oftentimes ascribed to unbalanced or insane women. Anger in men has been rationalized, for example in cases leading to a justified revenge or vengeance in the name of wronged individuals. Western literature, drama and film are abundant in affirmative patterns of rage and revenge in men (e.g. displaying dominance in society) and narratives demonstrating female rage as unnatural and socially destructive (e.g. in madwomen). Underlying this binarism there is a fear of anger in women pervading Western patriarchal culture(s). It is beyond the scope of this article to explore and analyse the cultural approach to anger in women and men, yet it has to be at least acknowledged. See for example: Rosenwein, B. (2020). *Anger: The Conflicted History of an Emotion*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press.

and non-humans, organic and non-organic forms are interconnected and interdependent.¹⁷ Tokarczuk's *Plateau* is a literary representation of a physiology of an ecosystem in disequilibrium, pervaded by images of blood (nature's revenge) in a snowy landscape.

A posthumanist instinct

“Nature's attacks” on humans may take on many forms: from disasters like droughts or floods to the more biblical, like sending locusts that eat up crops or an epidemic to “assail” their immune systems. Tokarczuk's narrative where nature strikes back, is in many ways a reminder that humanity has come up to a catastrophic, not a catastatic point. With reference to the survival of the human species, catastatic means that humanity is still in a phase before the greatest catastrophe. The final outcome of human impact on the environment hangs in suspension. Therefore there is still hope for humanity. But it needs to become conscious of another aspect of its existence. Namely, that it is still in its pre-anagnorisis state of development and will be stuck in it until it acknowledges that it co-exists with non-human beings under the same sun, with the same conditions. Respectively, it needs plays-within-plays to discover the nature of one's own predicament and simultaneously its inseparability from the Earth's identity, meaning allbeingness. Analogous to Shakespeare's *Claudius*¹⁸ – for whom “The Mousetrap” was devised as a reenactment of fratricide to force him to recognize his guilt – human beings still lack revealing, disturbing, consciousness-raising mousetrap-performances created by nature in order to illuminate a reticent quality of their being in the world. Perhaps only then *Homo sapiens* will enter its era of anagnorisis and reinvent itself, not only for his/her own sake. “Nature's attacks” can be read as forceful means to wake the human species up.

Olga Tokarczuk gives voice to her literary daughter, Duszejko, to touch upon issues related to a broader notion of environmental and climate change: anthropocentrism, animal rights, land exploitation, and global warming as well as employs fiction to raise the alarm about their significance for the Anthropocene that draws on anthropocentric illusions of our ontological separation from nature. *Drive Your Plow* can be therefore interpreted as a manifesto for the Anthropocene, a warning to tame humanity's ecological hubris, a protest song written by the tender writer, who gives her voice to the sensitive narrator, who sings it to awaken a posthumanist instinct, at least in some.

17 See: James Lovelock (1979).

18 In Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (act, scene) Hamlet arranges a performance of a play-within-a play (“The Murder of Gonzago”, which he refers to as “The Mousetrap”) to expose his uncle's guilt, to ‘catch the conscience of the King’ (3.1.540). The dumb show, played by a troupe of visiting players, is a court production based on a plot of fratricide and revenge, simultaneously being an re-enactment of a murderous deed committed by Claudius. Hamlet uses the power of theatre to unmask the murderer of his father. He finds the mousetrap an effective trap since Claudius is affected by and visibly reacts to a scene of pouring poison into the actor's ear (which mimicked the way Hamlet's father was killed). If ‘the play is the thing’ (3.1.539), then it is possible to treat some of nature's performances of disasters and catastrophes as constant enactments of past scenarios, in which humans “perform” actions harmful to the environment, or even (on a large scale) they commit ecocide.

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(“Jetzt kommen neue Zeiten”) and published on 31 March 2020 [at:] <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/buecher/autoren/reihe-mein-fenster-zur-welt-jetzt-kommen-neue-zeiten-16703455.html> [date of access: 21.01.2022]. On 1 April 2020 Olga Tokarczuk published the text in Polish on her FB profile [at:] <https://www.facebook.com/OlgaTokarczukProfil/posts/2716151888513431> [date of access: 29.01.2022]. Only then, the English version appeared in translation from Polish by Jennifer Croft.

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Received:
09.03.2022
Reviewed:
29.03.2022
Accepted:
10.05.2022

